

Minnie

Orlan Orphans Book 11

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Kirsten Osbourne

Unlimited Dreams

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Chapter 1

Minnie Sanders examined her reflection in the mirror. She wore

a full-length blue cotton skirt and silky ivory top, sewn especially for her by her older sister, Penny. She pinched her cheeks a little to bring color into them. Her adoptive mother, Edna Petunia Sanders, believed in a natural look, but Minnie didn't think there was anything wrong with giving nature a little help.

It was Sunday, which meant the family would attend church services. Minnie loved listening to her brother-in-law, Pastor Micah Barton, talk about some of her favorite passages from the Bible and his thoughts on leading a life of purpose. She was also looking forward to seeing some of the young men in town. Ever since her sister Hope had gotten married a few weeks back, Minnie had weddings on the brain. As one of fifteen orphans adopted by Edna Petunia and Cletus Sanders, Minnie's family was enormous. She had dozens of nieces and nephews by birth, adoption, and marriage, and the number was constantly growing.

Minnie adored the children in her family and couldn't wait for the day she would have little ones of her very own. And the first step toward that dream was to find herself the perfect husband. As one of the youngest of the fifteen orphans, Minnie had watched the older girls fall in love and get married over the years. She was always amazed at how quickly love seemed to strike in the Sanders family. She herself had never been courted by anyone, but she hoped that was about to change now that she was a little older.

Minnie and her sisters had all lived together in an orphanage in New York until they were teens. The church who ran the orphanage had decided they needed to move away in order to keep separate living quarters for the boys and girls in the orphanage. They'd made housing arrangements for the girls, and their matron, Cassie, had accompanied them all the way to the state of Texas. However, once they'd arrived, the arrangements had fallen through, and the girls were left in the lurch. Miraculously, an elderly couple who'd dreamed of children of their own had adopted all fifteen of them, no questions asked. The girls were all quite different, and although they had their

squabbles, they loved each other fiercely after all they'd been through.

Minnie marveled as she thought about how different her life was now than it had been in New York. In just a few short years, she and her sisters had truly blossomed in the heat of Nowhere, Texas. She worked around the house, making sure the spacious Sanders home was always clean and polished, and she had recently been hired to run errands for the mayor's office. Minnie couldn't wait to start working outside the home.

Although her adoptive parents were wealthy, Edna Petunia and Cletus believed in the value of hard work, and their one rule was that all of the bastards, as Edna Petunia affectionately called them, had to work, whether it was in the home or outside of the home. Until each of the girls married, they all followed this rule.

"Are you ready?" Theresa, one of Minnie's younger sisters, called from downstairs.

"Coming!" Minnie smoothed her braided hair one more time in front of the mirror, then walked down the stairs to join her family as they left for church.

"My, my, don't you look pretty as a peach today, Minnie!" Cletus Sanders proudly gave his daughter a kiss on the cheek. He couldn't believe how quickly the girls were growing up. It seemed like just yesterday that his new bride had insisted upon adopting a busload of orphans.

"Thank you, Cletus." Minnie followed Cletus and her sisters outside. She picked up her skirt and held it as she stepped into the family's wagon.

"I'm hotter than a steam engine, Cletus!" Edna Petunia used a handkerchief to fan herself in the wagon. She patted her bosom. "Peppermint stick, anyone?"

"No, thank you!" the Sanders girls said all at once. Cletus shook his head, too. He was still just as in love with Edna Petunia as he was the day he'd first laid eyes on her, but she sure was something else.

"I suppose I'll just have to drive faster in order to cool you down, sweetheart." Cletus started the horses and drove them at a rapid clip toward the church. Minnie looked around at her sisters—Theresa, Hattie, Alice, Martha, and Katie. The six of them were the only orphans who were still unmarried. Minnie loved living with her sisters and her adoptive parents, but she also couldn't wait to go to church with a family of her very own.

Since she was a young girl at the orphanage in New York, Minnie had always had a maternal instinct. She often helped feed and bathe the other girls in the orphanage, and even now that they were grown up, some of the girls still went to Minnie with their problems. She was a shoulder to cry on and a sympathetic ear. Her sisters knew that one

day, Minnie would make an excellent mother.

Cletus parked the wagon in a large field near the church, and the girls climbed out of the wagon, taking care not to trip over their skirts and boots. When Cletus got out, Edna Petunia swatted him on the rear.

“What was that for?” Cletus yelled. Edna Petunia simply shrugged.

Minnie grinned. Her parents carried on as if they were decades younger than they actually were. She hoped that someday, she’d meet a special man with whom she could have that kind of love.

The Sanders family walked into the church, where other parishioners were beginning to take their seats. Sarah Jane Barton, one of Minnie’s older sisters and Pastor Micah’s wife, walked over to greet the rest of the family.

“Minnie, you look so pretty today!”

Minnie was surprised. Sarah Jane was not a fan of empty words. If she gave a compliment, she meant it.

“Thank you.” Minnie smoothed her skirt. She did feel special in her new clothes. She spotted Penny and her brood of boys. “Penny is the one who deserves credit for sewing these for me.”

Penny and her husband, Tom, sat toward the middle on the right-hand side of church. Tom was a seventh son of a seventh son, and sure enough, Penny had given birth to only boys. They were well on their way to having seven sons of their own, but that wasn’t all—they also had adopted several orphaned boys who lived and worked on their property. Minnie loved that her family had such open and generous hearts. Penny’s family usually went to church in Bagley, the next town over, but they occasionally visited Micah’s church. Minnie was thrilled to see them!

Alice tugged on Minnie’s sleeve. “Who is that?” Alice whispered. Minnie turned to see what Alice was looking at.

Standing in the last pew in the church, several rows behind them, was a tall, thin man with blond hair whom Minnie had never seen before. He took off his hat and sat down in the pew. Minnie felt a little pull in her stomach. Who was this man, and what was he doing in Nowhere? Minnie thought she knew all of the men of a certain age in the small town.

Minnie ran through the list of eligible bachelors in her head. She knew it wasn’t prudent to be so interested in young men, but she really couldn’t help it. First, there was Abner, if you counted him, which Minnie didn’t, really. Abner had been after all of Minnie’s older sisters at one point or another. He was known around town for his terrible reputation for dating a different girl nearly every day of the week. Abner may have been single, but he certainly *wasn’t* husband material.

Next was Troy Jacobs. Troy worked with Frank Keifer, who was married to Minnie's sister Evelyn. Troy was ruggedly handsome, with broad shoulders and a mane of thick, wavy hair. He often said hello to Minnie and her other single sisters in church, and Minnie secretly hoped he might ask Cletus for permission to court her.

The third and final eligible man in Nowhere was John David Samuel, known to the girls for his powerful singing voice in church and known to Cletus as "the young fellow with three first names." John David had a face that was just as handsome as his voice was lovely.

Minnie wondered if the new man in the back was visiting a relative in Nowhere. That would explain why she had never seen him before and why she didn't know who he was. He was sitting alone, though, which didn't make any sense.

Minnie struggled to focus on Pastor Micah's words as the service began. She wanted to look toward the back of the church to catch a glimpse of the mysterious stranger, but she knew that would attract attention, and she didn't want to embarrass or upset her adoptive parents or her sister Sarah Jane. Even before she was a pastor's wife, Sarah Jane had taken religion *very* seriously.

Minnie was eager for the service to be over because it was her turn to help with dinner that evening, and she had convinced Edna Petunia to let her make a new dessert. She had specially ordered ingredients through her sister Ruby, whose husband, Lewis, owned and ran the mercantile in town. She couldn't wait to see what her family thought of her new lemon chiffon pie recipe.

As Pastor Micah ended the service, the townspeople of Nowhere left the small church building and began talking outside in the humid summer air. Minnie followed her family toward the exit. As she passed by the last row, someone behind her stepped on her skirt, sending Minnie sprawling toward the floor.

Minnie put her hands out to brace herself, but before she hit the floor, she felt a strong embrace, lifting her upright. When she looked up, she was staring straight into the face of the stranger!

The stranger took Minnie's hand and pulled her aside so the other churchgoers could continue on. A jolt rippled through Minnie's stomach at this strange man's touch. She found herself staring directly into his eyes.

Amazingly, the man's face turned a bright shade of red, and he looked down at the floor.

"Thank you." Minnie took a deep breath, trying to calm her racing heart. She couldn't tell if it was from the strapping young man standing in front of her or nearly falling in front of her family and Pastor Micah.

Sarah Jane and Micah both rushed over to make sure Minnie was all right. Before Minnie could say a word, the handsome stranger disappeared through the doors to the church.

"Oh, my! Did you hurt yourself?" Sarah Jane clucked her tongue. "I think that skirt might be a bit too long for you."

"It looks like that young gentleman made sure you didn't fall." Micah looked around for him, but the man had already left the church building.

"I'm fine, just a little embarrassed, that's all." Minnie straightened out her blouse and patted her hair. Everything seemed to be in order. "Do you know who that man was?"

Micah looked confused. "Come to think of it, I haven't seen him before."

"I haven't either. I wonder who he is." Sarah Jane thought for a minute. "Maybe Cletus or Edna Petunia will know."

Minnie nodded. She followed Sarah Jane and Micah outside, where they joined the rest of the family. Edna Petunia was offering peppermint sticks to Dorothy's young son, and Dorothy and her husband, Carter, politely declined on the boy's behalf. Penny and Tom's boys ran throughout the field.

Minnie laughed as she noticed her spunky niece, Amy, running just as fast as her older cousins. She looked around for Cletus and found him talking to a gentleman in a hat. As she walked nearer to him, she realized it was the stranger who had saved her from falling!

"Ah, there's Minnie, now!" Cletus boomed as he put an arm around Minnie's shoulders and squeezed. "I tell you, I don't know how it's possible, but every single one of my daughters is the most beautiful woman in this world, Timothy—aside from my wife, of course!" Cletus winked at the younger man.

"Cletus, I don't know if I've had the pleasure." Minnie hoped she seemed calm and collected. What a terrible first impression she'd made, tripping all over her skirt back in the church! She wasn't normally that clumsy.

"Oh my—where are my manners?" Cletus cried out. He clapped the handsome stranger on the back, and the young man grimaced, then smiled at Minnie. "This here's my new assistant, Mr. Timothy Parker. Timothy, meet Minnie Sanders."

"Pleased to meet you." Minnie allowed Timothy to take her hand for the second time that day. When he clasped it, she felt the same jolt she had inside the church. She bit her lip to keep from crying out in surprise.

"It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance." Timothy's voice was low and soft. Minnie felt like she could listen to him talk for hours.

Timothy was barely paying attention to what Cletus was saying.

Although the man would be his boss starting the following day, and he knew he needed to make a good impression, he could not stop staring at the woman standing before him.

Ever since he'd seen her nearly fall down in church, he'd felt a strong instinct to be close to her and protect her. Meeting her in person, properly introduced to each other and finding out her name, was even better than he'd imagined. She was clearly a sophisticated, charming, well-educated young woman. He knew she was probably fighting off prospective suitors.

And what did he have? He was a simple man, from a town smaller than Nowhere, several hours north. He didn't know much, but he was looking forward to learning everything Cletus Sanders had to teach him. And if, by some miracle, along the way he was able to become better acquainted with Minnie Sanders? Well, that'd be just fine with him. Just fine, indeed.

Chapter 2

Minnie slept so soundly the night before her first day of work that she didn't wake up at the usual hour.

Theresa shook her awake. "Don't you have to go down to the mayor's office this morning?"

Minnie gasped as she saw the morning sun streaming in from the windows. "Oh, no!" She darted around her bedroom, gathering her clothes and laying them out on the bed. She ran into the bathroom and hastily washed her face and brushed her teeth.

A few minutes later, she was out the door, frantically jogging toward the center of town. She carried an apple in her bag that she hoped she'd be able to eat at some point that morning. If she really hurried, she'd only be a few minutes late.

As Minnie rushed along, she heard hoofbeats behind her. She turned her head and moved to the side of the road to let the rider and his horse pass.

"Miss Sanders!" Minnie was surprised as she heard the rider call out her name. She put a hand over her eyes to see through the sun's glare and realized the man on the horse was Timothy Parker, Cletus's new assistant. He pulled alongside her with his horse at a trot as she continued to run.

"Do you need assistance?" Timothy was so formal in his speech! "You seem rather in a rush." Minnie thought it was rather charming but also quite unusual. That was all right, though. Minnie knew from her experience with Edna Petunia and Cletus that unusual could sometimes be wonderful.

"Oh, I'm just going to be late for my first day of work. I'm helping the mayor with town errands, and I overslept!" Minnie was worried that Timothy would think she was clumsy and lazy. His first two impressions of her were not at her personal finest.

"Would you like a ride? It may be a little cramped, I'm afraid, but it will be faster than running."

Minnie stopped running and stared at Timothy. She considered her options. She was already out of breath and not running fast enough. If she took the ride, she might actually make it to the mayor's office on

time. "Yes, please!"

Timothy blushed and stopped his horse, dismounted, and offered Minnie a hand. Minnie accepted it and positioned herself to mount the horse. Just then, she heard a loud, chugging sound and saw a cloud of smoke.

When the dust cleared, John David Samuel was staring straight at Minnie. "Care for a ride?" John David was one of the few men in town who had an automobile. Minnie had to admit, it looked much more comfortable than riding next to Timothy on his horse. It also would be much more proper for an unmarried woman like herself to accept a ride in an automobile rather than on horseback.

Minnie stepped back from the horse and looked at Timothy. "Thank you very much for your help I appreciate it. I'm going to take John David up on his offer." Minnie walked over to John David's car, and he pushed open the passenger door. She climbed into the car, and they zoomed away. "Thank you, John David."

Timothy watched as John David's car disappeared from view. He had known it was foolish to get his hopes up. Clearly, Minnie belonged with a man like this John David person. He was well-groomed and striking, with a fancy, expensive automobile. He climbed back onto his horse, Pepper, and took off toward town. There was no sense in him being late for his own first day of work.

"Thank you, John David! Thank you so much!" Minnie waved goodbye to John David as she walked toward the mayor's office. With any luck, she wouldn't be late at all.

Minnie's morning passed quickly at the mayor's office. Mayor Winstead and his secretary, Agatha, kept her busy straight until her lunch break. She walked all over the downtown area, taking envelopes and packages back and forth. She helped Agatha address all the mail and took it to the post office.

"You have an hour for your lunch break. You can spend it however you'd like, just make sure you're back at one o'clock." Agatha pointed toward the clock on the wall. "The mayor does not tolerate tardiness."

Minnie nodded. She had arrived exactly on time, and she vowed she wouldn't come close to running late again. She had planned on packing a lunch, but since she had overslept, she had run out of the house without a meal. She had her apple but didn't think that would satisfy her for the rest of the afternoon. She decided to visit Cletus in his office to see if he'd be willing to share.

Minnie walked down Main Street to the town judge's chambers where Cletus presided. She had already been there once that morning to drop off a letter from the mayor, but she hadn't seen Cletus or Timothy. She wondered how Timothy's first day of work was going. She hoped he liked working for Cletus. She loved her father, but he

sometimes took a little getting used to.

"Hello, Cletus!" Minnie called as she walked in. Cletus and Timothy sat at a round table with a pair of sandwiches in front of them. "Do you have enough for a third at lunch?"

Cletus stood up and walked over to greet Minnie. He kissed her on her cheek. "Oh, Minnie! What a surprise. Have a seat!" Cletus pulled out a second sandwich from his lunch pail. "Lucky for you, Edna Petunia always sends me with a spare. In case I get extra hungry."

Minnie took a seat between Timothy and Cletus. As she sat down, her leg brushed against Timothy's leg. She felt her face flush with heat. She hoped Cletus wouldn't notice. He was very overprotective of his adopted daughters, and she didn't want him getting the wrong idea about Timothy.

"How's your first day at the mayor's office? Does anyone know what they're doing over there?" Cletus took a huge bite of his sandwich.

Minnie laughed. "Cletus, you are terrible. Everyone's been perfectly nice to me. They're keeping me busy."

"Well, that's good." Cletus turned to Timothy. "We've taught the girls that idleness is a sin. Do you agree, boy?"

Timothy quickly nodded. "Yes, sir. My parents taught that to all of their children as well."

"Oh, do you have brothers and sisters?" Minnie asked.

"Yes. I have an older brother and three younger sisters." Timothy looked down as he spoke, as if he were embarrassed to be speaking directly to Minnie.

Minnie wondered if Timothy's older brother was just as good-looking as he was.

"What's on your mind, girl?" Cletus smiled. "Minnie's one of the smartest of all my girls, you know. She's probably thinking up something special."

Minnie looked down. She was glad Cletus hadn't guessed what she had been thinking about. She would be embarrassed if he knew the thoughts she was having about his new assistant. She thought quickly. "Oh, I'm just thinking about what errands I might have to do this afternoon. I hope I don't get a cramp in my leg. I've been doing a lot of rushing around. Not that I'm complaining—I am happy to have the job."

Cletus smiled. "I'll give you a ride home if your legs are too tired at the end of the day. Just meet me back here around closing time."

Minnie stood up and threw her arms around Cletus. "Oh, thank you, Cletus. I'm so lucky you and Edna Petunia adopted me."

Now it was Cletus's turn to seem embarrassed. "It's nothing at all, Minnie."

“You’re adopted?” Timothy raised an eyebrow. “I was curious as to how your family could have so many young girls so close in age . . .”

Cletus howled with laughter. “Now there’s an idea. I wasn’t married to Edna Petunia until well past her child-bearing days, but oh my. I can’t imagine if she’d had fifteen pregnancies! Minnie, can you picture it?”

Minnie shook her head ruefully. “I truly cannot. Edna Petunia is an incredible woman, but giving birth to fifteen girls might have been too much, even for her. Then again, I’ve learned not to underestimate her.”

“Well, we’re all glad the way everything worked out. Timothy, I tell you—a man without a family truly does not know what he’s been missing. All these years, I lived a fine life—out in the woods for a good part of it—but when Edna Petunia and I adopted these fine young women, I learned the reason life was worth living.” Cletus looked proudly at Minnie. “Do you have a young lady waiting for you in your hometown, son?”

Timothy nearly choked on the bit of sandwich he was eating. He coughed, and Cletus offered him some water. “I’m sorry about that, sir.”

Cletus grinned at his new assistant. He was such a proper young gentleman. “No need for such formality, son. Call me Cletus.”

Timothy took a sip of water. “Thank you, si—er, Cletus. No, I don’t have any young woman waiting for me where I grew up.” He looked at Minnie and hesitated. “If I’m being completely truthful, sir, I mean, Cletus, I’m not very good with women. My tongue gets all tied around them. Especially the pretty ones.”

Minnie could see Timothy’s face growing red, and it wasn’t from the sandwich he’d almost choked on. Was he talking about her when he said he got tongue-tied around pretty girls? She hoped so, but she also didn’t think Timothy was the type of person to flirt with a man’s daughter right in front of the man. Then again, Minnie did not have much experience in these matters.

Minnie looked at the clock on the wall. “Well, I’d better get back. Mayor Winstead does not approve of tardiness.”

“Thanks for stopping by, honey. Always glad to see my girls.” Cletus kissed her cheek as Minnie stood up and said goodbye.

Minnie waved to Timothy as she exited the judge’s chambers. She hoped she’d get to see more of him around town, but she wasn’t sure if he felt the same. But in the meantime, she needed to get back to the mayor’s office.

When she returned to the building, Agatha was cleaning up after her own lunch, and Mayor Winstead was leaning back in his chair, his hands folded across his stomach, a hat placed on top of his face.

Minnie wondered why he was sitting that way until she heard a loud, buzzing noise.

"Is he snoring?" Minnie whispered.

Agatha smiled and put a finger to her lips. She pointed to an envelope addressed to the town lawyer, Carter Reeves—who happened to be one of Minnie's several brothers-in-law.

Minnie was thrilled. Carter's office was in his home, which meant she would get to see her sister, Dorothy, and her adorable young nephew. Minnie straightened up her desk and set off for Dorothy and Carter's house.

As she walked through Nowhere, she thought about what a wonderful day it had been. She was so relieved that she hadn't been late to work, thanks to John David's ride. Part of her wondered what it would have been like to get onto Timothy's horse, but she tried not to think about that. She knew if Cletus would have seen her riding alongside Timothy, he would have had stern words for both her and his new assistant.

Yes, it was better if she focused her attention on one of the other bachelors of Nowhere, like John David. She looked around the street as she walked along, keeping an eye out for one of her friends or family members, but not very many people were out in the dry summer heat. Minnie waved a friendly hello to the few people she did encounter but didn't stop to speak with them.

When she arrived at the Reeves household, Dorothy opened the door.

"Minnie! What a nice surprise. Come on in." Dorothy held the door open for her younger sister and led her into the formal parlor. She took a seat and gestured for Minnie to do the same.

"I'm here on official business. A letter from the mayor's office." Minnie held up the mail for Carter.

Dorothy took the envelope from her and frowned. "Hm. I wonder what this is. Carter's hard at work, I'll just give this to him later. Now, can I fix you something to eat?"

"Oh, no thank you—I already ate lunch with Cletus!" Minnie explained. "And his new assistant . . ."

Dorothy squealed. "Minnie Sanders, you're blushing! Don't tell me you're sweet on Cletus's new employee." Dorothy quieted her voice. "I shouldn't shout. I just put the baby down for his nap!"

Minnie lowered her voice, too. "I will admit, I think he's very handsome. And he seems very polite. Maybe a bit too polite . . ."

"Nothing wrong with having some manners." Dorothy looked toward the kitchen. "Are you sure I can't get you anything to eat? What about a drink?"

"No. I really should be getting back, Dorothy. Mayor Winstead

doesn't tolerate being late." Minnie stood up and brushed off her skirt.

"Thanks for stopping by, Minnie. Remember, you can stop by any time you want to babysit!" Dorothy walked her sister to the door and waved goodbye as Minnie set off for Main Street.

As Minnie walked toward the mayor's office, she had to slow down because she felt pain in her feet with each step. If every day working for the mayor was going to involve this much walking, she would have to send away for a new pair of shoes.

Once Minnie returned to the mayor's office, she was glad to see that Mayor Winstead was awake again. Agatha asked for Minnie's help with some filing and paperwork, and Minnie was happy to give her feet a break. She worked straight through until she heard the church bells ringing five times.

"I can't believe it's the end of the day already!" Minnie finished putting away a folder in one of the filing cabinets.

Agatha beamed. "You did a very good job, Minnie. There'll be more to do tomorrow."

"Yes, dear. We're very lucky to have you in our office." Mayor Winstead smiled at Minnie as he prepared to leave the building.

Agatha showed Minnie how to lock up and close the office. When they walked outside, Minnie remembered Cletus's offer to give her a ride home.

"Thank you so much, Agatha. I'll see you tomorrow!" Minnie called as she rushed down the street to the judge's chambers.

Cletus and Timothy stood outside, where both their horses were attached to a hitching post.

"I'm so glad you didn't leave yet. My feet are—" Minnie stopped talking as she realized that she might sound ungrateful if she kept complaining about her pain. She was very lucky that Cletus had helped her get the job at the mayor's office, and she wanted to keep it as long as she could. "Thank you for offering me a ride home."

Cletus waved it off. He unhitched his horse from the post, and he and Minnie climbed up into the wagon. "Good night, Timothy. See you tomorrow morning!"

Timothy watched the wagon get smaller and smaller as Cletus and Minnie drove off toward their home. He hoped he'd be able to see more of Cletus's spirited yet sweet daughter. She intrigued him in a way no woman ever had before. He knew that he likely wasn't good enough for someone like her, but in that moment, watching her ride off, he knew that he had to try.

Chapter 3

That evening, Minnie approached Cletus in his formal parlor after dinner.

“May I speak to you about something?” Minnie hemmed and hawed. She wasn’t sure how to ask for what she wanted.

Cletus’s eyes peered at her over the top of his newspaper. “Get on with it, dear.”

“I was wondering if—if you’d be open to inviting Timothy over to dinner. He’s new in town, and he must be awfully lonely.” Minnie felt nervous about how Cletus might react, but she was glad she’d been able to get her words out.

“Edna Petunia!” Cletus hollered.

Edna Petunia came running in from the kitchen, with bits of chocolate frosting on her cheeks and hair. “What is it?”

Minnie waited nervously for her adoptive parents’ judgment. Was Cletus going to scold her in front of Edna Petunia?

“Should we have the new young man I hired over for dinner?” Cletus wondered out loud.

Edna Petunia frowned. “I don’t see why not. But what are you hollering for me for? You don’t need my permission to invite a man over for dinner.”

“Yes, but I like to ask for it, anyway. You know I live to make you and our daughters happy, Edna Petunia.” Cletus stood up and tipped Edna Petunia back into an embrace.

Edna Petunia squealed in delight. “You crazy old man! You’re mad!”

Minnie couldn’t believe the way her parents carried on sometimes, but she had a soft spot for the pair. They truly were in love with one another, and they did live to please each other. She thought it was all rather sweet.

“Then it’s settled. I’ll invite the boy over for dinner tomorrow,” Cletus decided.

“Thank you, Cletus.” Minnie started to leave the formal parlor so her adoptive parents could have some space.

Cletus called out to her. “One more thing, Minnie dear.”

“Yes, Cletus?”

“No falling in love with this boy. He’s my assistant, and I don’t want to mix work and family. Understood?” Cletus sounded more serious than Minnie had ever heard him.

Minnie bit her lip. That was the last promise she wanted to make Cletus. But she didn’t have a choice. “Understood.”

That night, Minnie tossed and turned, unable to get to sleep. All she could think about was Timothy. His jawbone, his strong hands, his narrow waist. It was unfair how handsome he was. She wondered if he ever thought about her the way she thought of him. Then she remembered Cletus’s warning about not falling for Timothy.

She tried to focus on something else but kept coming back to the way Timothy had looked at her during lunch. She’d felt like he was truly listening to her, like she had something important to say. Like she was something special.

Minnie pulled her quilt closer around her. There had to be something she could do to get her mind off Cletus’s new assistant. She tried to think of John David, who had been so kind to her that morning while driving her to work. He’d asked about her family and her job and told her he hoped he’d see her again sometime soon. John David was a real sweetheart. She didn’t know if he was even interested in her in that way, but if things did work out, she was sure he would make a wonderful husband and father. He was smart and kind.

Minnie yawned and sighed. She knew she needed to get to sleep so she could wake up early and get to work on time. Boys could be such a headache sometimes!



“YOU HAVE A LOVELY HOME, MRS. SANDERS.” Timothy complimented Edna Petunia over chicken-fried steak, green beans, and mashed potatoes. The Sanders family had just begun to eat the meal Edna Petunia and Hattie had prepared for dinner that evening with Timothy as their guest.

“Where in the world did you get those manners? I thought you were born in the middle of a turnip field somewhere.” Edna Petunia shook some more salt onto her steak.

Minnie gasped. She knew Edna Petunia hadn’t intended her comment to be rude, but she worried Timothy might take it that way. Fortunately, Timothy was smiling. “My mother grew up in Boston. Her family took manners quite seriously, and she taught that to my siblings and me. Even though we lived on a farm, away from town or

a whole lot of people, she insisted we speak properly.”

“Hm. That’s something!” Edna Petunia shoveled more potatoes into her mouth.

“What made you want to work for a judge, Timothy?” Minnie was eager to change the subject. She was glad Timothy felt comfortable opening up to her family, though.

Timothy looked straight at Minnie before answering. “I’ve always thought fairness and justice were essential to any society. When I was younger, I thought I might be a lawyer myself one day.”

“He’s got the brains for it, all right.” Cletus chimed in. “You should see the documents he writes for my legal arguments.”

Timothy blushed. Minnie secretly enjoyed watching Timothy’s discomfort. It showed that he truly cared about what other people thought of him, that he was shy, and that he was modest. All of these were good qualities—qualities she wanted in a future husband.

After dinner, the Sanders family all retired to Cletus’s formal parlor. Timothy sat in the place of honor on the couch while Cletus took his seat in his arm chair. The girls took turns entertaining their adoptive parents and Timothy. Katie, who had a lovely voice, sang her favorite hymns. Hattie played her flute. Minnie and Alice did a silly dance.

Timothy laughed and smiled throughout the evening’s festivities. Being around the Sanders family made him feel less alone. Although he missed his family and their small, rural farm, he knew that he had done the right thing in accepting the job with Cletus. He had a lot to learn from the man—including how to start a family. Although it sounded like the older man had had a late start, he envied Cletus’s large, close-knit brood. He knew that in addition to the girls who lived at home, there were several other daughters, their husbands, and a growing number of grandchildren.

Timothy had always pictured himself with a warm, caring wife and a large number of children. He knew that it may not be easy to find the one woman he wanted to spend the rest of his life with, but he hoped he would find her soon.

Timothy wanted to stay for a while longer, but he found himself yawning and excused himself. “I’ve had such a wonderful evening. Thank you very much for your hospitality.” He bowed to Edna Petunia and Cletus Sanders, then walked over to each of the girls and pressed his lips quickly to each of their hands.

Minnie felt a ripple of desire as Timothy kissed her hand. She wanted him to kiss so much more than just her hand. She walked Timothy to the door. “I had a very nice time tonight. Thank you for coming.” She hoped Timothy might say something sweet to her that revealed how he felt about her.

“I had a very nice evening. Thank you.” Timothy looked like he had more to say, but instead, he gave her another one of his formal bows and exited the house. Minnie watched him mount his horse and ride off toward his house.

Minnie went back into the parlor, where some of her sisters had started to play a game. She sat down and watched them.

Theresa noticed Minnie’s quiet, solemn expression. “What’s wrong, Minnie?”

“Oh, it’s nothing.” Minnie glanced at Cletus. She couldn’t help having a crush on his new employee. But she wouldn’t admit it to Cletus. She had made him a promise.

Hattie and Katie took notice of Theresa and Minnie’s conversation. They crowded around Minnie. “What is it, Minnie?” Katie asked.

“Something’s wrong. I know it!” Hattie declared.

Now Cletus and Edna Petunia were paying attention. Minnie sighed loudly. “Nothing is wrong, everyone! Please, just leave me alone!”

With that, Minnie ran up to her room.

“Hm. I’ll go see what’s gotten into *her*.” Edna Petunia clucked.

“Oh, dear. I’ve seen that look before.” Cletus clutched his hand to his heart.

“When?” Alice chimed in.

Cletus paused for maximum dramatic effect. “I’ve seen that look whenever one of our girls has fallen in love.”

Chapter 4

Timothy watched from the front door to the judge's chambers as

John David and Minnie drove by in the automobile. It seemed nearly a daily occurrence. John David would pick Minnie up and drive her to work. Since Minnie was only a few doors away, Timothy often heard the engine or saw the two of them talking and laughing together in the car. He felt a pang in his chest each time he saw Minnie's cheerful smile when talking to John David. Timothy wished he could be the one driving the car.

Timothy sighed and pushed the door open. It wasn't fair to Cletus if he spent all day making himself miserable about a simple crush. He needed to focus his attention on his work and making sure he was meeting Cletus's needs.

"Have a great day!" John David called as he waved goodbye to Minnie. She waved back.

John David was such a nice young man. She genuinely enjoyed talking to him and thought he dressed well and treated others with kindness and respect. He was educated and had a steady job and came from a good family in her church. But for some reason, Minnie just didn't feel anything when she was with him.

She had fun and could laugh with him, but when she accidentally brushed his hand with hers in the car, she felt completely normal. On the other hand, each time she was around Timothy, it felt like there was an electric charge in the air. She had tried to stay away from Cletus's office during the day because she remembered what he had said about mixing business with family. She wanted to be respectful of his wishes, but it was difficult when Timothy was so handsome and kind.

Minnie was the first to arrive at the mayor's office, so she began to get ready for the day ahead. She enjoyed her work with Mayor Winstead and Agatha. The position kept her on her toes. There was never a dull moment, and that suited her perfectly. Agatha had even mentioned that if she were to retire, Minnie might be able to take over her job and find another young girl to take Minnie's place.

Minnie was excited to hear about opportunities like that, but they

also made her feel sad. She knew that if she were married, she wouldn't work anymore. She'd stay at home, raising her family and running the household. In a way, she hoped she'd never be offered Agatha's position because that meant she'd be spoken for.

Mayor Winstead strode into the office humming. Minnie knew that was a sign that it would be a very good day in the mayor's office. Agatha arrived a bit later and busied herself in several stacks of paperwork. Minnie continued her project from the day before, rearranging all the files in the filing cabinet in alphabetical order. Somehow, over the years, the system had not been followed, and it was Minnie's job to set it right.

Lunch hour seemed to come in the blink of an eye. Minnie had packed her lunch, and she sat outside on a street bench as she ate an apple and a few bits of cheese.

Abner sauntered down the street, wearing a cowboy hat. He tilted it off his head when he approached Minnie. "Why, Miss Minnie, you do look absolutely stunning today. May I have the pleasure of taking you out this evening?"

Minnie let out a deep breath. "No, thank you, Abner."

Abner kept smiling. "All right. If not tonight, when *can* I take you out?"

Minnie sighed. When would Abner understand that he was not the kind of man that she or any of her sisters would date? "You need to talk to my father."

Abner's face clouded a bit. "Cletus Sanders?"

"Yes. That's my father." Minnie didn't mean to be rude, but she wanted Abner to move along.

"Oh. All right." Abner walked away rather quickly. Minnie breathed a sigh of relief.

At the judge's chambers, Cletus was just about to dig in to his fried chicken sandwich when there was a sharp knock on the door. "Will you go see what that racket is about?" Cletus called to Timothy.

Timothy opened the front door to find a mischievous-looking man standing on the doorstep.

"I'm Abner, and I'm here to see Mr. Cletus Sanders about one of his daughters, Minnie." Abner stuck his hands in his pockets and began to whistle.

Timothy felt his palms grow sweaty. Who was this man, and what did he want with Minnie? He seemed too nonchalant and care-free to truly respect her the way Timothy did. He hoped Cletus would send this man away at once. "Cletus?"

Cletus frowned. He did not appreciate being disrupted on his lunch break. He pulled himself up out of his chair and walked over to the door. "What's this about?"

Abner regarded Cletus with a confident smirk. "I'd like to court your daughter, sir."

Cletus looked at Abner in irritation. "I've got fifteen of them. Which one are you speaking about?"

Timothy put his hand to his mouth to stifle a laugh. Say what you would about Cletus, but the man's spirited temper was something to behold.

Abner swallowed. "Minnie, sir."

"Well." Cletus put his hands around his belt loop. "Minnie's a smart girl with a good head on her shoulders. You're welcome to invite her out with you, I don't really care, but I wouldn't expect her to agree. She's got good taste, you see."

Abner seemed to ignore Cletus's insult and simply smiled a cheeky smile and grabbed Cletus's hand. He pumped it up and down enthusiastically. "Thank you, sir!" Abner rushed off down the street.

Timothy stared after this odd man. It seemed like Cletus didn't think very highly of this Abner person, so why had he given his permission for the man to court his daughter? Timothy didn't understand.

"I'm sorry you had to deal with that. Let's get back to our lunches." Cletus motioned for Timothy to sit down at the table again. Cletus grabbed his sandwich again. He held it in front of his mouth, preparing to take a bite, and then they heard a sharp rapping at the door.

"Oh, for goodness sake . . ." Cletus just glared at the closed door. Timothy jumped up to answer it.

This time, Cletus could see the visitor was Troy Jacobs, dressed unusually formally in a suit and tie. Troy spent his days on Cletus's son-in-law's ranch. Cletus had only seen him in a suit on special occasions at church. He paced back and forth at the doorstep.

"How may I help you?" Timothy asked.

Troy stopped pacing. "I'm here to see Mr. Sanders, sir."

"Cletus, this gentleman's here to see you," Timothy called. He wondered what this visitor needed. They didn't have any appointments scheduled until the following day.

Cletus eased his way to the front of the room, feeling hunger pangs in his stomach. "Yes, son?"

"Sir, I'd like to . . . well, the thing is . . ." Troy seemed unnaturally nervous.

Cletus groaned. "Spit it out, son. I'm in the middle of my lunch."

"I'd like your permission to court your daughter, sir. Minnie. I think she's an honorable and beautiful young woman who would make a fine match for me. I work hard and get along well with your family. Do I have your blessing?" Troy blurted out his speech, which

he'd clearly practiced for some time before arriving.

Cletus had to admit, he was impressed. He knew from his son-in-law Frank that Troy was a good man and could be trusted fully. "Yes, son. I give you my blessing. You need to ask Minnie, though. She's a bright and responsible young woman, and she can make her own decisions."

Troy's face relaxed. "Thank you, sir. You won't regret it." He walked away, humming to himself.

Timothy tried to hide the anger and frustration on his face. Two men in less than an hour that had come to ask for Cletus's permission to court his daughter? That had to be some kind of record. It also told him that Minnie Sanders was likely to be someone's wife well before the end of the year. He shuddered as he thought about attending church and seeing Minnie be promised to another man forever.

Timothy tried to work up the courage to approach Cletus about his feelings for Minnie. He knew that he wasn't the best potential suitor, but he thought that maybe his work ethic and rapport with Cletus could make a difference. He didn't know if he was comfortable asking Cletus such a personal question after only knowing him for a few days, though.

Cletus closed his eyes and prepared to finally take a bite of his fried chicken sandwich. He could practically taste the—

Someone pounded on the office door. "For crying out loud!" Cletus yelled and climbed out of his chair. He stomped over to the door and flung it open. "You'd better speak fast!"

Timothy shook his head from the side of the room. He hadn't been fast enough to answer the door, and now he watched as Cletus greeted the man who loved giving Minnie rides to work.

"Well. The young man with three first names!" Cletus shook his head. "Like I said, fast. I've got a fried chicken sandwich waiting for me made by my lady love. It's delicious, and I would like to be eating it. Now. You understand?"

John David blushed. "I'm sorry to interrupt, sir. You see, I'd like to ask if you would grant your permission for me to court your daughter, Minnie. We've taken a shine to one another, and I'd truly like to get to know her better, with your approval, of course."

"Get in line, son!" Cletus cried. He walked over to the table and took a big bite of his sandwich. "Ah."

John David was baffled. "Excuse me, sir?"

Cletus waved a hand and talked with his mouth full of food. "I don't care. Ask her if she wants to go out with you. Doesn't matter to me. But she may have something to say about it."

John David's expression turned excited. "Yes, sir. Thank you, sir!" He closed the door on his way out.

Timothy felt his heart sinking. There were now at least three men in the town of Nowhere who wanted to court Minnie Sanders. He'd known before that his chances of attracting Minnie were slim, but this was an entirely different situation. He needed to forget all about Minnie Sanders. It was clear that nothing good would come from his attraction to her, and the sooner he could accept that, the sooner he could focus on his work with Cletus and make the old man proud.

For the rest of the afternoon, Timothy put his head down and tried to lose himself in the stacks of legal documents he and Cletus had to review. Every once in a while, the image of Minnie in her ivory blouse and blue skirt would pop into his head, but he did his best to block her out of his mind.

Meanwhile, at the mayor's office, Minnie daydreamed about what her wedding might be like. She had no idea if anyone would ever propose to her, but she thought it must be very romantic and longed for the day it would happen for her. She had attended her older sisters' weddings and watched closely for every detail, impatient for the day when she was the one wearing white. She had plans for everything from the dress to the flowers to the cake. Now all she needed was a groom!

At the end of the day, Minnie washed the windows on the inside of the office after Agatha and the mayor left the building. She wiped each window with a dry cloth when she was done and put away the vinegar she had used. She went outside to lock up.

Minnie suddenly heard a voice behind her, calling her name. She turned around quickly.

"Minnie!" Abner raced toward her. "I thought you'd gone home for the day!"

Minnie sighed. She just wanted to go home and eat dinner with her family. "What is it, Abner?"

"I talked to your father." Abner beamed proudly.

Minnie didn't understand. "And . . . ? What's your point, Abner?"

"He told me I had his permission to ask you out on a date!" Abner stepped a little closer to Minnie, and Minnie took a step backward.

"Abner, I'm flattered, but I do not want to go on a date with you!" Minnie looked Abner directly in the eye so there was no doubt about it. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to get home."

Minnie began to walk away, and Abner hurried after her, a shocked expression on his face. "Why not?"

"Abner, you've dated almost every single unmarried girl in this town. I'm sorry, but I'm looking for a man who will have eyes for me and only me." Minnie continued on her way.

"Wait, Minnie!" Abner called out.

Minnie exhaled and turned around. "What, Abner?"

“Is there anything I could do to make you change your mind?” Abner looked more serious than Minnie had ever seen him before.

Minnie shook her head. “I’m afraid not, Abner. I’m sorry. I’m sure you’ll find someone who’s a great match for you. But I’m not that girl.”

“Okay. Thank you for being honest with me, Minnie. Sometimes I feel like people laugh at me, but they won’t tell me why to my face.” Abner put his hands in his pockets and turned to walk in the other direction.

Minnie paused. “Abner?”

Abner turned around, a hopeful expression on his face. “Yes?”

“Maybe you should start contemplating what kind of woman you’d like to end up with. Do some serious thinking. Maybe even meet with Pastor Micah. I think if you slow down a little, you might find your special someone.” Minnie didn’t know why she was giving Abner advice, but he looked like he could use it.

“Thank you, Minnie. I’ll think that over. I appreciate it. Have a good night.” Abner tipped his hat and went on his way again.

Minnie continued her walk out of town. It was well after five o’clock, and there were barely any people on Main Street. Suddenly, she heard hooves galloping nearby.

A voice rang out. “Minnie!”

Minnie looked over her shoulder and saw Troy Jacobs driving a wagon, dressed in a suit. Minnie had never seen him dressed so formally before, not even in church. She liked what she saw. Troy’s body was strong and muscular from his hard work day in and day out on Frank Keifer’s farm. She waved up at him. “Hi, Troy!”

Troy pulled to a stop. “Would you like a ride home?”

“Yes, please.” The long walk and her aching feet made Minnie’s decision easy. Troy stuck his arm out to help her up into the wagon.

Minnie climbed up. “Thank you.”

Troy flicked the reins, and they set off for the Sanders’ house. Troy glanced at Minnie shyly. “You look very nice today.”

Minnie grinned. “Thank you, Troy. You look very nice, too. I don’t think I’ve ever seen you wear a suit before.”

Troy cracked a smile. “I don’t have much occasion to wear one out on the farm.”

“No, I suppose not. Beautiful day we’re having, isn’t it?” Minnie appreciated her view of the sun as it began its descent for the evening.

Troy took a while to respond. “Yes. It’s very nice.”

Minnie wondered why Troy seemed so distracted. “Is everything all right?”

Troy swallowed. “I’m sorry. I’m not very good company right now. I’m a little nervous.”

“Nervous? Why are you nervous?” Minnie wondered what Troy could be nervous about. He always seemed so sure and confident.

Troy took a deep breath and prepared himself for what he was about to say. “You see, earlier today, I asked your father’s permission to court you. So I’d like to ask you, Minnie Sanders, if you’d be willing to go out on a date with me.”

Minnie couldn’t believe it. First Abner, and now Troy. Even though she was thrilled to have a man—and a handsome man, at that—ask to court her, for some reason, she thought immediately of Timothy. She wished he were the one driving the wagon and asking to court her.

Minnie tried to focus on what Troy was saying. Troy was the man in front of her asking her out on a date. “Yes, Troy! I’d be delighted to go on a date with you.” As soon as she answered, she felt relieved. Who cared about Timothy when she had Troy Jacobs interested in her?

Troy smiled ear-to-ear. “Wow. I was real nervous before coming here. I’m glad I caught you.”

Minnie realized what a nice smile Troy had. “Yes, I was on my way home from work.”

“That’s right, you work for the mayor, now, right?” Troy asked.

“Yes, I do.” Minnie looked over at Troy. She still couldn’t believe that he was interested in her.

Troy grinned as he realized Minnie was looking at him. “What’s that like?”

“Oh, I really enjoy it.” Minnie gushed. “There’s a lot to do, but I’m learning so much about the mayor’s work and our town.”

Troy was impressed. “That’s great. Must be very interesting.”

“Yes, it is. And how is your work out on the ranch?” Minnie didn’t know much about the ranch, but she did know her brother-in-law, Frank Keifer, often said he wouldn’t be able to keep it running successfully without Troy’s help.

“Things are going well. We’re having a good year.” Troy explained.

“That’s wonderful.” Minnie began daydreaming about what would happen if she and Troy got married one day. They’d have to find a home of their own, maybe even a ranch of their own. Like her sister Evelyn, she’d learn to work on the ranch while also raising the children she and Troy would have together. Oh, it sounded so romantic!

“Here we are.” Troy pulled up in front of the Sanders house.

“Thank you very much for the ride, Troy.” Minnie climbed out of the wagon.

“Good evening, Minnie. I sure am looking forward to our date,” Troy said sincerely.

Minnie blushed. “I look forward to it, too. Good night.”

Troy waited for her to walk inside the front door before he set off for the ranch.

As soon as Minnie stepped inside the house, her sisters crowded around her and asked her several questions all at once.

“Who was that?” Theresa peeked out the window.

Alice cried out, “Did he kiss you?”

“Are you going to get married?” Katie wanted to know.

Minnie smiled secretively. “Maybe I’ll tell you all about it later.”

“You have to tell us, Minnie!” Theresa pleaded.

“Please, please, Minnie!” Hattie joined in, coming into the entry. She was assigned to help with the evening’s dinner and had flour smudged across her cheek.

Minnie wiped the flour off Hattie’s cheek. “Well, maybe I’ll tell you a little . . .”

“Yes!” Katie shouted.

“First of all, after work, a very unusual thing happened. I was locking up, and Abner—”

“Abner? Ew! Why would you want to be seen with Abner?” Theresa made a face.

“Let me finish, Theresa!” Minnie laughed. “He asked me if I would go on a date with him!”

“What did you say?” Hattie was hanging onto Minnie’s every word.

“I said ‘No,’ of course.” Minnie explained. “I told him I need a man who only cares about me and no one else. But then . . .”

“Then what?” Alice was practically giddy with excitement.

Minnie continued her story. “On my way home, Troy Jacobs asked if I needed a ride.”

Martha wandered into the entry way after hearing her sisters’ excited voices. “Troy Jacobs? He’s so nice.”

“Yes, he is,” Minnie agreed. “While he was driving me home, he asked me if I would go out on a date with him!”

The girls squealed in delight.

“You’re going to marry him! I know it! I just know it!” Katie jumped up and down.

Minnie laughed. “Slow down a little, Katie. He has to ask me first!”

“I wonder where you’ll go on your date,” Alice said dreamily.

“That’s a good question. We haven’t talked about that yet,” Minnie replied.

“I can’t believe two men asked you to court on the same day!” Theresa pointed out.

“It certainly was an eventful day,” Cletus boomed as he walked into the room. He had been in his formal parlor, resting.

“Cletus, Abner and Troy both asked me if I wanted to go out with them! They said they both asked you for your permission, and you

said yes.” Minnie told her father about what had happened after work.

Cletus smiled. “And what did you tell them?”

“I told Abner ‘no’ and Troy ‘yes.’ I know I’m only starting out, but I just don’t think Abner is the right match for me.” Minnie looked at Cletus nervously. She hoped he didn’t secretly approve of Abner over Troy.

“That’s my girl!” Cletus shouted. “I thought as much, but I wanted to give you the chance to make the decision for yourself. Troy Jacobs is a fine man. You didn’t mention John David whatever-his-name-is, though. The one with three first names.”

Minnie was confused. “What about John David?”

Cletus put his hand over his mouth. “Oops.”

“What are you talking about?” Martha wondered.

“Let’s just say, Abner and Troy won’t be the last men in the town of Nowhere to ask our Minnie for a date. That’s all I’ll say. Now, what’s for dinner?” Cletus rubbed his hands together. “Do I smell a pot pie?”

Minnie was torn. On the one hand, she had secretly wished that John David would ask her on a date. But now she had a date with Troy. She didn’t want to be like Abner, going out with a different person practically every day of the week. She also didn’t want to hurt anyone’s feelings.

Minnie walked into the kitchen with the rest of her family and sat down at the kitchen table. It seemed like things were going her way. So why did she suddenly feel bad?

Chapter 5

The following day, as Minnie was walking to work, she heard the familiar chug of John David's engine.

"Would you like a ride?" John David cried over the smoke.

"That would be great." John David opened the door for Minnie, and she climbed into the car. "How are you doing, John David?"

John David smiled at her. "I'm doing very well. How are you, Minnie?"

"I'm fine, thank you." Minnie felt a little sick to her stomach. She had a feeling she knew what was going to happen next.

Sure enough, John David took a deep breath and launched into his question. "Yesterday, I had the pleasure of speaking with your father. I asked for his permission to court you, and he gave his blessing. Minnie, I'd like to take you out on a proper date sometime. What do you say?"

Minnie felt like there was no right answer. On the one hand, she genuinely liked spending time with John David. He was smart, attractive, and kind—all qualities she was looking for in a husband. However, she had also agreed to go on a date with Troy. She didn't think it was fair to either of the men to agree to dates with both of them.

Minnie had learned about honesty and the importance of personal integrity from Cletus and Edna Petunia. She was glad they had instilled their values and work ethic into each and every one of their daughters.

Minnie decided to explain the truth to John David. "I really enjoy spending time with you, John David. I'd like to go on a date with you, but I want to be honest. Troy Jacobs asked me on a date yesterday, and I agreed. I'd like to go out with him and then if that doesn't work out, I'd gladly go on a date with you. I hope you're not offended. I'm simply trying to be forthright and honest."

John David looked a little taken aback but nodded his head. "That makes sense, Minnie. Thank you for trusting me enough to be honest with me. I'm not happy to hear it, but I appreciate that you were honest about it."

“Okay, good. I was worried you’d be upset with me!” Minnie explained.

“No, I could never be mad at you, Minnie.” John David smiled ruefully. “I will admit, though. I hope you and Troy have a *terrible* date!”

Minnie playfully swatted at John David. “That’s not nice!”

“But it’s true.” John David pointed out, then pulled up next to the mayor’s office.

Minnie rolled her eyes. “Thank you for the ride, John David.”

“Any time, Minnie. Any time.” John David watched her walk into the mayor’s office, then pulled away.

As hard as she tried, Minnie was unable to focus on her work. Agatha had to call her name several times to get her attention.

“Minnie, are you feeling all right, dear? I’ve explained this to you three times, and you don’t seem to understand.” Agatha frowned. They were putting away books, and Agatha was instructing Minnie on how to decide where each book should go.

“I’m so sorry,” Minnie apologized. “I’ve been a little distracted, but you have my full attention.”

Minnie struggled to focus on her work for the rest of her day. She kept worrying she’d made the wrong choice. Troy was kind and handsome, but John David was, too. She also couldn’t shake the thought of Timothy Parker. She still secretly wished he would ask her on a date, too.

At lunch time, Minnie went to visit Cletus and sat down with Cletus and Timothy in the judge’s chambers.

“Minnie, my dear, did you decide what to do about your problem?” Cletus asked, beaming proudly.

“What problem?” Timothy asked, concerned.

Minnie felt her face turning bright red. She wished Cletus hadn’t said something in front of Timothy. She didn’t want Timothy to know. “It’s nothing.”

“It’s not nothing!” Cletus cried. “Three young men from Nowhere have asked my permission to court Minnie. Timothy, you know I have many daughters. But this is the first time three different men have asked for one of my girls to court them at the same time!”

Timothy couldn’t believe it. He found it hard to swallow the bite of sandwich he was eating, and his heart began racing harder than it ever had before. He couldn’t think of anything to say. He knew Minnie was something special. He just didn’t expect that the whole town would feel the same way.

“I told John David no because I had already told Troy that I would go out with him,” Minnie explained.

“Well, that’s very considerate of you. Isn’t it, Timothy?” Cletus

boomed.

He tried to remain calm and act as if he didn't care. "Yes, that's considerate."

"I'm not sure." Minnie looked up at Timothy. "Sometimes I think that the right man for me is a different man entirely." Timothy nearly choked on his sandwich.

Cletus patted Timothy on the back until he stopped coughing, then looked over at Minnie, confused. "What do you mean by that, Minnie?"

"Oh, nothing. I should get back to the mayor's office. Thank you, Cletus. Good day, Timothy." Minnie rushed out the door before Cletus and Timothy could give her a proper goodbye and returned to the mayor's office.

Minnie walked leisurely back to the mayor's office. She wasn't actually running late. She had just known that she needed to get out of Cletus's office before Cletus or Timothy figured out what she was thinking.

She was looking forward to her date with Troy, but there was still a part of her that wished Timothy had been one of the men who had asked for Cletus's permission to court her. She knew that would never happen, especially with Timothy working for Cletus, but she couldn't help the way she felt.

Minnie tried to focus on the positives. She considered herself extremely lucky that even in her small town, she had been asked out on dates with three different men. Well, two, if you didn't count Abner, who had asked out almost every eligible young woman in Nowhere.

That afternoon, all Minnie could think about was where Troy would take her on their date. Courtship was all a very new world for her, and she didn't know what to do or how to behave. From everything she knew about Troy, though, she expected that he'd be a perfect gentleman.

Agatha had to scold her twice that afternoon because her head was in the clouds, imagining what her life might be like if Troy continued to court her.

"Minnie! You're normally so responsible. Where do you drift off to?" Agatha looked baffled.

"I'm sorry, Agatha. I promise, I'll do better." Minnie continued dusting the bookshelves so the mayor's office kept its sparkling appearance.

Agatha only sighed and moved on to the next task.

Once Minnie had locked up for the afternoon, she decided that a visit to her sister Evelyn was in order. Troy worked for Evelyn's husband, Frank, and lived on their property. Evelyn would know what

Troy liked and didn't like so Minnie could make the most of their time when they went on their date.

Minnie accepted a ride home from Cletus that afternoon, and as they made their way back to the Sanders's house, Cletus tried to figure out what was going on in his daughter's brain.

"You seemed . . . distracted today at lunch. Everything okay?" Cletus tried to remain neutral. He didn't want his daughters to think he was overly interested in their personal lives. He just wanted them to know that he loved and supported them, and he was a little worried about Minnie.

Minnie smiled at Cletus. "Yes. I am looking forward to my date with Troy. I will admit, I am a little nervous."

"That's to be expected. You're a good girl, a girl who thinks with her head. So I know that all will be well in the end," Cletus tried to reassure her.

Minnie beamed. "Thank you, Cletus. I sure hope so!"

It was Minnie's turn to help prepare dinner, so she went straight to the kitchen.

Edna Petunia was standing in the pantry, staring down an empty sack of flour. "Now where did you disappear to?"

"Excuse me, Edna Petunia?" Minnie said cautiously. Edna Petunia looked like she did not want to be disturbed.

Edna Petunia jumped up and spun around. "Minnie! Where'd you come from?"

"Cletus just brought me home from work. I'm ready to help with dinner." Minnie gestured to the flour sack. "What exactly is going on in here?"

"I was sure I had more flour. And somehow, I turned my back, and it was all gone!" Edna Petunia cried.

Cletus came in just then and walked up to Edna Petunia. "My, my, you look more and more beautiful each day, my dear." He grabbed her around the waist and planted his lips firmly on her mouth. Edna Petunia kissed him back with equal passion. "I'll be in the parlor." Edna Petunia sent Cletus off with a pat on his bottom.

Minnie noticed another sack of flour on the table behind Edna Petunia. "Excuse me, Edna Petunia—is this the flour you were looking for?"

Edna Petunia jumped again. "That's the very one! I'll be darned. Thanks, Minnie." Edna Petunia ripped open the sack of flour and began pouring it into a large bowl. "Now, tell me about what's going on with you and this harem of men that's suddenly interested in you!"

Minnie blushed, taken aback. "Oh, Edna Petunia, it's not like that."

"Nothing wrong with it, Minnie. I'm just making conversation, don't go getting your blusters in a fluster!"

Minnie was confused. *What does that even mean?* Then she spotted Edna Petunia's hip flask sitting on the kitchen table. She lifted it up, and sure enough, it was mostly empty. Minnie's sisters thought that Edna Petunia might keep something a little stiffer than cough syrup in the flask, but they left her to her own devices.

"I'm not getting my . . . blusters . . . in a fluster!" Minnie tried to speak Edna Petunia's language. "I'm just trying to deal with these men one at a time. Well, except for Abner."

"Lord knows what goes on in the mind of that young man." Edna Petunia looked up to the sky. "I'm glad you made the decision that he was not a good match for you."

"I did feel a little bad about it." Minnie admitted.

Edna Petunia stopped mixing and stared Minnie straight in the eye. "Minnie Sanders, you never, ever need to feel bad about standing up for yourself! You hear me?"

Minnie nodded. "Yes, Edna Petunia."

Edna Petunia patted her daughter on the shoulder. "That's good, dear. Now, let's get this pork in the pan!"

Minnie helped Edna Petunia place the pork chops in the frying pan. "Tonight, if it's okay with you, I'd like to eat dinner at Evelyn and Frank's."

Edna Petunia frowned. "And why would that be?"

"Well, I haven't seen Daniel or little Frances in a while." Frank had a son with his first wife, who had died in childbirth. Evelyn and Frank had met because Evelyn was the assistant-teacher for Daniel's class, and he was a real handful. Evelyn had somehow found a way to get through to Daniel, and she and Frank had fallen in love in the process. Now, their family also included a beautiful young toddler named Frances.

"So you're just trying to be a good aunt, is that it?" Edna Petunia continued. She pointed a whisk at Minnie. "What about your other nieces and nephews?"

"Well, uh . . ." Minnie tried to think of an excuse, but then Edna Petunia burst out laughing.

"I'm teasing you, girl. I know you want to ask Evelyn and Frank questions about Troy to get ready for your date. Am I right?" Edna Petunia showed off her full set of pearly-white dentures.

Minnie had to laugh a little, too. "You figured me out, Edna Petunia. That's exactly what I'm doing."

"I knew it!" Edna Petunia gloated. "It's a long walk to the Keifer's place. Why don't you have Cletus drop you and pick you up? I can finish up here."

"Oh, I couldn't ask him to do that. I wouldn't want him to miss a minute of dinner." Minnie knew Cletus tended to get a bit agitated

when he was even the slightest bit hungry.

"Nonsense. Cletus!" Edna Petunia called into the formal parlor, where Cletus liked to read his newspaper.

"Yes, love?" Cletus called back.

"Minnie needs to go to the Keifer ranch. You need to leave now and drop her there so you'll be back in time for dinner," Edna Petunia explained.

Cletus poked his head into the kitchen. "What's all this about?"

"Don't worry about it, Cletus. It's between us women." Edna Petunia put a finger to her lips and looked at Minnie. Minnie giggled.

"All right, then. We'd best be on our way, Minnie." Cletus went outside to prepare the wagon to go out again.

Minnie looked around the kitchen. "Are you sure you don't need my help?"

"Get out of here before I change my mind!" Edna Petunia shouted.

Minnie didn't need to be told twice. She rushed out of the kitchen and out the front door. "Thank you, Edna Petunia!"

Cletus didn't speak much on the way to the Keifer ranch. Minnie thought he might have dinner on the brain. Edna Petunia was an excellent cook, and she hated to miss dinner herself. But she knew the reason she was going to see Evelyn and Frank was a good one. If she had to miss one delicious home-cooked meal, she was glad it would be for an important cause.

When Cletus pulled up in front of the Keifer ranch, he tipped his hat to Minnie. "Give my regards to your sister and her husband, please."

"I will, Cletus. Thank you." Minnie gathered her skirt in her hands and climbed down off the wagon.

"I'll be back in two hours to pick you up." Cletus told Minnie as he prepared to set off for the Sanders' home again.

"Thanks, Cletus. That's perfect." Minnie watched as Cletus, the horses, and the wagon disappeared from her view. She walked over to the front entrance to the home where Evelyn and Frank lived and knocked on the door.

When Evelyn answered, she wore a surprised look on her face. "Minnie! We weren't expecting you."

"I'm sorry, Evelyn. I just got an idea in my head I couldn't stop thinking about," Minnie tried to explain.

"I understand how that goes. Come on in." Evelyn held the door open so Minnie could enter. Evelyn, Frank, and their children lived comfortably on the Keifer ranch. Frank had given up a high-paying job in the state of Georgia before moving to Nowhere and becoming a rancher. He could have done anything he wanted, but he chose to remain on the ranch, working with the animals each and every day.

Minnie walked through the house and spotted her niece, Frances, in the corner. She approached the young girl and made cooing sounds. "Hi, Frances!"

The baby giggled in response.

Just then, Frank Keifer strode through the door. He walked up to Evelyn, put his hand to her face, and kissed her deeply. "Hi, Minnie."

Minnie looked down at the floor, embarrassed.

"What are you doing here?" Frank stared at his sister-in-law. He liked Minnie well enough, but unexpected house calls didn't seem like her at all.

Minnie knotted her hands nervously. "I was hoping, if it's not too much trouble, that I could stay and eat dinner with you all tonight."

"Okay, Minnie. I'll set an extra place at the table, but you need to tell me why you came here," Evelyn said, picking up a few toys from the floor.

Minnie blushed. "It's personal."

Frank's eyes widened. "In that case, I'll go change my shirt for dinner. You women can talk about whatever it is you need to talk about. I've learned from experience that sometimes, I just do not want to know what's going on in a woman's head."

Evelyn smiled at Frank gratefully. He walked out of the room, his boots clicking on the wood floors. "Come on, Minnie—you can tell me what this big personal secret is about while you help me set the table."

Minnie followed Evelyn into the kitchen and watched as Evelyn took out plates and silverware. The sisters began to place the dishware on the table as they talked.

"It's not like you to be so secretive," Evelyn noted.

Minnie nodded and took a deep breath. "Troy Jacobs has asked me to go out with him."

Evelyn squealed. "Oh, my goodness, Minnie! I didn't know that!"

"Yes, and I'm nervous about going out with him. I was hoping you could tell me a little more about what he likes and what he doesn't like." Minnie smiled.

"Let me think." Evelyn brushed her hands against her skirt. "He really is quiet, the strong and silent type, you know? It's hard for me to think about anything he'd really like to talk about."

"What about the ranch?" Minnie suggested. "He seems to enjoy his work here."

"Yes, that's a good point. I know! We'll ask Frank at dinner." Evelyn clapped her hands together. "Oh, I hope Troy asks you to marry him. Then you could move out here near us."

"Hold on a minute. We haven't even been out on the date yet!" Minnie exclaimed.

Frank poked his head in the kitchen. "Safe for me to come in?"

"Yes, have a seat. I'll get the children." Evelyn disappeared into the living area and came back with baby Frances. Daniel wasn't far behind her.

"Hello, Aunt Minnie." Daniel gave Minnie a huge smile. Minnie knew he could be a handful, but he had certainly inherited his father's charm.

"Hello, Daniel," Minnie replied. Everyone took a seat at the table. Frances sat in Evelyn's lap.

Evelyn spooned out green beans and baked chicken to her family, and everyone began to eat their food. "How was your day, dear?" Evelyn asked Frank.

Frank sighed. "We're having a good season so far. You never know what the cattle might do when it comes to the heat, though."

"Oh, is the weather supposed to get warmer?" Minnie inquired.

Frank smirked. "It'll get warmer, all right. The newspaper said we're to expect a ten degree increase over the next two weeks."

"Oh, my." Minnie was surprised. "That is warm!" Since she had grown up in New York, she had never fully adjusted to Nowhere's warmer climate. On days where temperatures climbed, she preferred to stay indoors.

"In times of inclement weather, it sure is great that we have Frank's men who do such good and hard work." Evelyn winked at Minnie.

"Yes, I'm lucky that I have a team of men I can trust here," Frank agreed. "Wasn't always like that when we lived in Georgia."

"That Troy Jacobs, what a fine man he is! Frank, don't you agree?" Evelyn continued.

Frank frowned as he took another bite of chicken. "Troy? He's a fine fellow, sure."

"I do wonder what a man like that . . . what he might enjoy doing. Do you have any idea?" Evelyn continued in an innocent voice.

Frank grimaced. "Evelyn, if I didn't know any better, I'd say you had taken a shine to Troy Jacobs."

"No, obviously that's not true. You know I only have eyes for one man." Evelyn stared openly back at her husband. She knew one of the things he loved about her was that she would speak back to him the same way he spoke to her. "I just want to learn a little more about the men that work for you. Can't I show a little interest in your employees?"

Frank looked back and forth between Minnie and Evelyn. "I have a feeling you two are up to something. I haven't figured out what, exactly."

Minnie looked at Frank, wide-eyed. "I would be interested in

learning more, too, Frank. I only see the men that work for you at church. I'd love to hear more about them."

Frank thought for a minute. "Hm. I guess I should tell you about Freckles, right?" Freckles was a pale, red-headed boy with, as his name implied, a face full of freckles. He was barely sixteen and certainly not old enough for Minnie whatsoever.

Minnie and Evelyn both frowned, and Frank smiled. "Or I could tell you all about old Mr. McFadden, who helps with the animals from time to time. I could tell you all about his life and the things he's seen."

"Maybe we could start with Troy, though," Evelyn said.

"Aha! I had a feeling it was something to do with Troy." Frank looked at Minnie. "You don't have a crush on him, do you?"

Minnie buried her face in her hands.

"I knew it!" Frank grinned broadly. "Well, Troy's a wonderful man. I'd trust him with my life. I think you two are going to have a nice time together. I support it."

"Oh, thank you!" Minnie cried. She had never had a brother, but she felt like some of her brothers-in-law acted like they were her brother sometimes. They made her feel safe and protected, just like Cletus did.

For the rest of the dinner, Frank teased Minnie a little, but he also had only good things to say about Troy Jacobs. As Minnie helped Evelyn clean the kitchen after dinner, she thought about it. Troy could offer her a very nice life. Perhaps everything did have a way of working itself out!

Chapter 6

A few evenings later, Minnie sat across from Troy at the Nowhere ice cream parlor. He had paid for two chocolate sundaes with cherries on top, and Minnie eagerly dug in to her dessert.

Troy hadn't said much for most of the evening. Minnie hoped the ice cream might loosen his lips a bit. He was very nice and pleasant, but he just didn't seem to talk very much. She tried to ask him several questions, but nothing seemed to put him in a talkative mood.

"Do you come here often?" Minnie tried to make conversation.

"No, I don't," Troy answered politely.

"I don't either, but I love the flavors!" Minnie commented.

"Mm." Troy took another bite of his ice cream.

Minnie looked around at the other patrons of the ice cream parlor. Many young men and women were chatting animatedly. A family with three small children were laughing in the corner. And an older couple, even older than Edna Petunia and Cletus, were sharing the same ice cream cone.

Troy and Minnie sat silently for a few moments, eating their ice cream carefully. Minnie knew everyone else in the parlor was having a much better time than she and Troy. She didn't know what the problem was. He was very handsome and caring. But something just wasn't working.

Minnie had heard her older sisters saying, "When you meet the right man, you just know!" Well, unfortunately, she just knew she had met the wrong one.

Minnie nervously wracked her brain, trying to think of what she would do if Troy asked her for another date. She knew she had to be honest with him, but she didn't know the best way to do that.

Minnie found her thoughts drifting to Timothy, wondering what he was doing that evening. She imagined Timothy at the very same ice cream parlor on a date with a young woman of Minnie's age. Just the thought of Timothy with another woman made Minnie's blood boil. Without realizing it, she squeezed her spoon so hard it flew out of her hand. The spoon landed on the floor with a *clang*, and the older couple looked up, startled.

Troy laughed for the first time all evening. "Some grip you have there. Let me get you a new spoon." Troy stood up, went to the counter, and came back with a new spoon for Minnie.

"Thank you." Minnie took the spoon from Troy and resumed eating her ice cream. She hoped he would make another joke—or say anything at all—but Troy remained silent until they had finished their sundaes.

"I suppose I should be getting you home to your family." Troy motioned to the clock on the parlor wall.

Minnie nodded. "I suppose you should."

As they walked to Troy's wagon, Minnie hoped Troy wouldn't ask her out on a date again. She couldn't believe she had been dreaming about the two of them getting married! Unfortunately, now she knew that Troy wasn't the man for her.

Troy helped Minnie into the wagon and then went around to the other side and climbed in himself. With a flick of the reins, they set off toward the Sanders's house. Troy slowed the horses as they approached the house.

Troy looked at Minnie nervously. "I had a very nice time with you tonight, Minnie."

"Thank you again for the ice cream, Troy," Minnie said. She was grateful that he had talked to Cletus and taken her out. She just didn't plan to repeat their date.

"I was wondering . . . if you'd like to go out with me again sometime?" Troy's eyes looked so hopeful that Minnie felt absolutely awful.

"Oh, Troy." Minnie sighed. "You are a wonderful man, and you are going to make someone an incredible husband one day. But I think we should stay friends. I don't see this relationship going anywhere romantically."

Troy looked down at his hands. "I see."

"I'm so sorry. I wish I felt differently. But I know that God has a plan for us all. I don't think you and I are meant for each other. But thank you so much for asking me to go out with you. I really appreciate it." Minnie tried to get Troy to understand how she felt.

Troy was nothing if not polite. "Thank you for agreeing to go out with me. I am sorry it didn't work out, but I did have a nice time. I hope you have a good evening, Minnie."

"Thank you, Troy. You too!" Minnie climbed down out of the wagon and walked quickly back into the Sanders' house. She couldn't wait to change out of her date clothes and get ready for bed. It had been a long and disappointing day.

That evening, Minnie had a dream about a wedding. She was the bride, wearing a long, lace-covered dress, and she walked down the

longest aisle she'd ever seen before. When she got to the altar, she tried to look up at her groom, but she couldn't see his face.

Minnie woke up in a cold sweat. She felt guilty for turning Troy down for a second date, but she knew inside her heart that she'd made the right decision. She worried, though, that this would mean she'd be alone forever. Minnie knew there was nothing wrong with that and that Edna Petunia had been alone for many years before she'd found Cletus. But Minnie had always pictured herself falling in love, getting married, and having children.

Minnie could not get back to sleep. She turned over and over again in her bed all night and felt terrible in the morning.

"What's wrong with you? You look atrocious!" Edna Petunia commented at breakfast.

Minnie took a sharp breath. She wasn't prepared for Edna Petunia's brutal honesty at this hour. "I didn't get much sleep."

"I hope it wasn't that Troy Jacobs keeping you awake. Did he get you home at a reasonable hour? I fell asleep on the sofa!" Edna Petunia scolded.

"Oh, no. That wasn't it at all. To tell the truth, things didn't go very well with Troy. I won't be going out with him again. It's not his fault at all. He's perfectly nice. I just didn't really . . . feel anything," Minnie confessed.

"That's too bad," Alice remarked. "He's so handsome!"

"Yes, he's dreamy!" Theresa chimed in.

"That may be true, but he barely talked to me at all last night!" Minnie exclaimed. "Maybe it's strange, but I want a man who I can actually have a conversation with!"

Edna Petunia shrugged. "I can't blame you for that, Minnie. I'm sure the right man is out there for you somewhere."

Minnie sighed. "I sure hope so, Edna Petunia. I sure hope so."

Edna Petunia reached into her bosom and took out a peppermint stick. "Here, dear." She held it out to Minnie.

"No thank you, Edna Petunia." Minnie shook her head sadly. She didn't know what could fix the way she was feeling, but a sweaty old peppermint stick was definitely *not* the answer.

Chapter 7

The mayor's office was preparing for the annual town picnic, and Minnie and Agatha worked overtime to make sure they were ready for the big event. Minnie was glad to have the distraction of extra work so she didn't have to think about the lack of romance in her life.

One day, after finally leaving the office at seven o'clock, she heard a familiar chugging sound behind her. She spun around on her heel and saw John David's car pulling up beside her.

"Minnie! I haven't seen you in a while. Would you like a ride?" John David tipped his hat.

Minnie thought about it. "Sure. I don't see why not. Thank you."

"You know, I've been thinking a lot about you lately," John David told Minnie.

Minnie took a deep breath. "You have?"

"I understand the reason why you didn't want to go on a date with me. But in case things don't work out with the other fellow, I wanted to let you know, the offer still stands." John David clenched his hands around the steering wheel. He didn't normally get nervous, but he was nervous now, and it showed.

"It does?" Minnie asked hopefully.

John David grinned. "Absolutely. Minnie, you're the sweetest and most beautiful girl in this town. I'd be honored to go on a date with you."

Minnie was flattered. "I did go on a date with Troy Jacobs, as I told you. I realized that the two of us—Troy and me, that is—were not meant to be a couple. So . . . if you'll still have me, I'd love to go out with you."

John David couldn't believe his ears. "That's wonderful news! I want to make the most of this moment, Minnie. How about I pick you up tomorrow night after work and take you out for a nice dinner?"

"That sounds lovely." Minnie smiled.

John David pulled up to the Sanders' house. "Here you are."

"Thanks again, John David. I'm looking forward to tomorrow." Minnie waved goodbye.

John David waved back and drove off.

Minnie walked slowly into the house, where her sisters greeted her.

“I heard loud noises. Was that an *automobile*?” Martha questioned.

“Who drove you home, Minnie?” Theresa tugged on Minnie’s sleeve.

Minnie didn’t want to get her hopes up like the last time she’d been on a date, so she decided to only tell her sisters the bare minimum amount of information. “John David Samuel gave me a ride home.” She kept her voice as casual as possible.

Minnie walked up the stairs and went into her bedroom. Her sisters followed and made their way into her room as well. Although all the rooms in the Sanders’s home were large and spacious, squeezing six sisters into one at the same time took a little work.

“Tell us about John David!” Katie demanded.

“Are you going on a date with him?” Hattie wanted to know.

“Will you marry him?” Theresa jumped up and down.

“Girls! Everyone, calm down!” Minnie spoke forcefully, and the girls quieted. “I need a little privacy. I’ll tell you all about this later.”

Minnie’s sisters sighed, but they made their way to the door to exit the bedroom. “When is later?” Theresa grumbled on her way out.

“Thank you, ladies!” Minnie called after them. She waited until they were fully down the hall and then shut the door. Finally, a little peace and quiet. She could sit and think.

Minnie tried to imagine what her date with John David would be like. He had mentioned a nice dinner. There were a few proper restaurants outside of Nowhere, but Minnie thought those would be too far away for John David to take her. Still, he must have had some tricks up his sleeve. John David seemed like he was always thinking and planning.

Minnie joined her family for dinner but stayed quiet throughout the meal. Miraculously, her sisters didn’t tease her or ask too many questions. Instead, it was just a normal, relaxing, uneventful meal. Minnie felt she could get used to those.



MINNIE WORE her favorite ivory blouse and blue skirt for her date with John David, and she waited anxiously outside the mayor’s office at the end of the day. Agatha and the mayor had left to go home earlier, and Minnie had stayed to finish filing paperwork. At five o’clock, she had locked up the building and was waiting on the street for a sign of John David.

Minnie was nervous. It wasn’t like John David to be late.

Finally, she heard the familiar chugging noise.

"I'm so sorry I'm late!" John David panted, clearly out of breath. He had pulled the car up next to Minnie and held a giant bouquet of flowers in front of her face.

Minnie accepted the bouquet. She buried her nose in the flowers and took a deep breath. "These are beautiful. Thank you."

"I am so sorry. I was helping my father out in the office today, and one thing led to another. I won't let it happen again." John David looked at Minnie earnestly, and she knew he was telling the truth.

"Don't worry about it. Now, where are we going?" Minnie laughed and hopped into the car. She had known John David for quite some time. She knew for a fact that he never had a problem with talking. Things were looking up already.

"It's a surprise," John David replied. Minnie was excited to find out what John David had planned for them.

A half-hour later, John David pulled up to an elegant, stately home, nearly as big as Edna Petunia and Cletus's.

Minnie's brow wrinkled in confusion. "Where are we?"

"This is my parents' house," John David explained. "I've arranged a meal for us here."

John David turned off the automobile and went around to the opposite side of the car to let Minnie out. He escorted her up the stone walkway to the lovely house.

"Wow, the house is so beautiful," Minnie breathed. The handsome gentleman, the beautiful estate, and delicious food? It was like something out of a fairy tale!

"Thank you." John David knocked on the door three times, and it was almost immediately opened by a man wearing a black suit.

"Welcome," the man in the suit said. "Please follow me." He led John David and Minnie into a formal dining room that was covered in flowers of all shapes and sizes. A long table was set up in the center of the room.

The man pulled out one of the chairs for Minnie and helped her get situated while John David took the seat directly opposite of Minnie.

"May I get you anything to drink?" the man asked.

"I would love a glass of water." Minnie smiled. "Thank you." The man spun on his heel and exited the dining room. Minnie looked around the lovely space. Although the house was a bit smaller than the Sanders's home, this house had less furniture and decorations, making it appear cavernous. "Your parents' home is lovely."

"Thank you," John David said, barely looking around the room. "We choose only the best in the Samuel family."

Minnie felt herself get nervous. She didn't know what John David was getting at, and she didn't particularly care to find out. Suddenly,

she wasn't sure what she was doing there. She tried to think of a topic of conversation. "It's so nice that you have an automobile. We've been trying to get Cletus to get one for the family, but he refuses to."

"Oh, really?" John David smirked. "I don't know why he wouldn't want one. They're so much faster than waiting around for silly horses."

"And I suppose they don't have the same temperament as horses," Minnie added.

John David frowned. "No, of course not. An automobile doesn't have a temperament!"

Minnie opened her mouth to explain that she was joking, but before she could, the man in the suit came back in with her glass of water. He set it down in front of her, and she eagerly took a few sips of it.

Behind the man came a woman in a black dress carrying a tray with two small bowls on it. She handed a bowl to each of them, then left the dining room along with the man.

Minnie felt a little strange. At the Sanders's house, everyone chipped in and helped out with serving dinner. At the Samuel house, it seemed like these people were there only to serve John David and his family. Minnie had a weird feeling about the whole situation. She tried to shake it off and focus on John David.

"Oh no!" John David hissed as he took the first bite of his soup. "It's cold!"

Minnie took a spoonful of food and put it in her mouth. "This is delicious. I don't think it's too cold."

John David's face grew red. "Please excuse me." He carried his bowl with him out of the dining room. Minnie fidgeted nervously at the table, running her fingers along the ivory linen napkin she had placed in her lap.

When John David returned, he no longer had his bowl with him, but his face still wore an agitated expression. "I'm very sorry about that."

"No need to apologize," Minnie replied.

"I expect the best from my people," John David continued. "It makes me very upset when something isn't to my liking."

Minnie felt a sinking feeling in her stomach. She couldn't help it. She really had gotten her hopes up that her date with John David would go very well. She had even daydreamed about what it might be like to become his permanent passenger in his automobile. But now she saw the real John David, she realized he was nothing more than a spoiled brat.

Minnie wondered if there was a good way to excuse herself from the situation so she didn't have to stay any longer, but that didn't

seem to be an option. Instead, she concentrated on eating the rest of her soup.

Next, the servers brought in salads on small plates.

John David took one look at the plates and erupted. "I asked you to put tomatoes in the salads!"

The woman began to apologize. The man in the suit tried to talk to John David, but John David wasn't having any of it.

"I don't mind," Minnie told John David. She was embarrassed by how much of a fuss he was causing about the salads. She tried to calculate how long the walk home would be.

"That doesn't matter. I asked them to put tomatoes in the salads, and they didn't. I expect only the best from my staff."

Minnie wanted to point out that the staff were technically in service to his parents, not him, but she didn't think that would go over well. She just wanted to get through the date as quickly as possible.

The woman took the plates away, still apologizing.

Minnie knew if Cletus or Edna Petunia were there, they would have had words with John David. Although they were wealthy, they did not approve of putting on airs or demeaning others. They would not have been impressed with the way John David ordered the staff around.

"That's a lovely blouse you're wearing." John David smiled at Minnie. "Where did you buy it?"

"Oh, my sister sewed it for me," Minnie explained.

John David frowned in disdain. "I didn't realize something homemade could look like that. My mother prefers to go shopping in the city. You can't get the best quality materials at the mercantile."

Minnie had about had enough. "You know, Lewis, who runs the mercantile, is my brother-in-law, John David. I'd *prefer* we not speak rudely about the business of my relatives."

John David looked taken aback. Just then, the woman server returned with two fresh salads topped with tomatoes. John David smiled and sighed. "Much better."

Minnie busied herself with eating her salad. If she had food in her mouth, she didn't have to talk. And that was good because she didn't feel like she had anything to say to John David.

Fortunately, John David stayed mostly quiet as he picked at his salad. He held up a piece of lettuce with his fork and examined it. "This doesn't taste as fresh as it should."

The woman and the man in the suit brought out the main course next on little platters. They set the platters down in front of Minnie and John David and pulled the covers off. There were two prime ribs on the dishes.

Minnie wasn't feeling very hungry. She thought about pretending

to be sick so John David would have to take her home right away, but she didn't feel comfortable lying, no matter how uncomfortable this date was.

Instead, she used her fork and knife to cut off tiny pieces of the prime rib. She ate a few of them, already feeling full by the heavy meal after the soup and salad.

John David ate his prime rib vigorously. "Thank goodness they didn't make any mistakes with this. I love prime rib. It's my favorite meal." John David didn't ask Minnie if she liked it or what her favorite meal was. In fact, Minnie felt like she was practically invisible.

After they had finished with the main course, the woman server brought in two small dishes filled with vanilla ice cream and cherries on top. Minnie was relieved. Dessert meant the date was almost over.

Minnie ate her ice cream as quickly as she could, but John David was savoring every last bite.

He frowned as he neared the end of his dish. "I do wish they had used a bigger serving dish. This wasn't enough."

"Oh, I'm full. I couldn't eat a stitch more. Thank you again for a wonderful meal." Minnie hoped that by complimenting John David, he would act like he was in a better mood.

"It was so-so. I hope you won't hold this against me. I would like to see you again. You're the prettiest young woman in town." John David tried to rub his foot against Minnie's shoe under the table. Minnie moved her feet so he couldn't reach.

"I wouldn't dream of holding it against you." Minnie's words were honest, but there were a few parts she wasn't saying out loud. What she wanted to say was that he couldn't pay her to go on another date with him!

The man in the suit came back to the table one last time and placed two small mints on the table. The woman came and cleared away the ice cream dishes.

John David popped one of the mints into his mouth and sucked on it loudly. "I suggest you do the same." He grinned at Minnie, and Minnie knew what he was implying.

"I'll save mine for later." Minnie slipped the mint into the small pocket Penny had sewn into her blouse. John David frowned. "If you don't mind, I think it's time I get home. I don't want to keep my parents up worrying."

John David seemed confused. "But they know you're with me!"

"Yes, they do. And they still expect me to be home at a reasonable hour while I'm living under their roof." Minnie couldn't believe she had to explain this all to John David. It was clear that he thought that the rules didn't apply to himself.

“But I won’t get to show you the entire property.” John David crossed his arms and sulked. Minnie thought he was acting more childish than one of her nieces or nephews.

“No, you won’t.” Minnie held her gaze steady so John David knew she meant business. After a few more minutes of complaining, John David opened the door for her and walked her outside.

As Minnie climbed into John David’s automobile, she knew one thing for certain: John David Samuel was certainly *not* the love of her life.

Chapter 8

The evening after Minnie's date with John David, she was unusually quiet at dinner. When anyone asked her a question, she responded with a single-word answer or a heavy sigh.

Finally, Edna Petunia had had enough. "What's on your mind, Minnie? There's clearly something bothering you."

Minnie frowned and looked at the floor. "No, it's nothing, Edna Petunia."

"You've been sulking around this place for days!" Edna Petunia cried.

"I don't want to trouble anyone," Minnie explained.

"If you don't want to trouble anyone, you have no business living in this household. We're family, and family helps each other. Got it?" Edna Petunia loved to talk about how different members of the family helped each other out. Chances were, whatever the problem was, one of the members of the huge and talented family could solve it.

Katie and Hattie looked at each other and giggled. They loved their adoptive mother, but she did have a tendency to go overboard at times.

Minnie cleared her throat, and everyone looked at her. "I'm starting to think that I'm destined to end up all alone." She hung her head forlornly.

Cletus hated to see Minnie so broken up. He stood up and walked over to her, patting her shoulders. "There, there, sweetheart."

"Why would you say a thing like that?" Edna Petunia wondered out loud as Cletus sat back down at his place at the head of the table. "You've had more men parading into your father's office, asking for your hand in courtship, than any of our previous girls! Of course you'll find a suitable match!"

Minnie appreciated that Edna Petunia sounded so sure that Minnie would end up happy, but she didn't think Edna Petunia understood how hard it was to be a young woman in a small town. "But the only men who have asked me on a date are not people I want to spend time with, let alone marry!" Minnie was on the verge of tears.

"Oh, please don't cry, Minnie!" Alice said softly. She put her hand

over Minnie's.

"I'm sure there are other men in Nowhere who would love to court you, too, Minnie." Theresa added. Minnie smiled gratefully at her sisters. She knew she was lucky to have such a supportive family.

"What about that man who works for you, Cletus? He's unmarried, isn't he?" Hattie asked. "He's quite handsome."

Minnie's face turned a bright shade of red.

Cletus shook his head vehemently. "No, no. Well, yes, Timothy is single. But he's my employee. He knows better than to chase after one of my girls."

"What if he falls in love with one of us, though?" Alice asked innocently. Katie and Hattie began to laugh again.

"Absolutely not! I do not plan on mixing my business and my family, and that's final. Is that understood?" Cletus looked around at each of his unmarried daughters. They all nodded their heads in agreement.

"It is a shame, though," Edna Petunia remarked. "That young man sure is something to look at! If I weren't already a married woman . . ."

"But you are a married woman." Cletus grinned and squeezed his wife's chin. He kissed her on the lips. "Luckily for me."

The girls all smiled. They were used to at least one display of affection per meal.

Later that evening, once the dishes were done and everyone had gone upstairs to bed, Hattie and Katie stayed up whispering and laughing.

"Did you see Minnie's face when I mentioned Timothy?" Hattie asked.

Katie nodded. "She was redder than a tomato!"

"What do you think that means? Do you think she has a secret crush?" Hattie thought about her sister and Timothy. It all seemed very romantic, the idea of Minnie and the new gentleman in town.

"I think she really does. And that gives me an idea..." Katie began to explain her plan to Hattie. She whispered the rest of the details. "What do you think? Will you help me?"

Hattie grinned in the dark room. "Absolutely."



IN THE MORNING, Minnie accepted a ride from Cletus into town. As he chattered about his plans for the day, Minnie glumly stared at the horses. Just a few days ago, she had been so excited about all the possibilities for her future. Now it seemed most likely that she'd end

up all alone. She was thankful for her family, but she had always pictured herself getting married and having children. She felt like her dream had been taken away from her.

“Minnie, are you even paying attention to me?” Cletus asked crossly as he flicked the reins.

Minnie turned to Cletus. “I’m sorry. I suppose I am a little upset.”

Cletus wasn’t having any of Minnie’s attitude. The young woman had her health, her beauty, and a family that loved her. “Nothing to be upset about, Min. You keep working hard and being kind to others. That’s the only thing you can do. Moping doesn’t solve anyone’s problems.”

Minnie sighed. She knew Cletus was right, but she felt so sad and broken up inside. Cletus pulled the wagon to a stop in front of the mayor’s office, and Minnie got out, still pouting.

“Chin up, Minnie!” Cletus waved goodbye as he took off to park the wagon and tie the horses to a post. Minnie trudged into the mayor’s office, not looking forward to a long day of tasks. Usually, she enjoyed her work, but she was in no mood for errands or small talk today.

Meanwhile, back at the Sanders’s house, Hattie and Katie were racing through their daily chores. They had woken up extra early to get a head start on the day.

“What are you two up to?” Edna Petunia called from the kitchen as she heard them dusting in the formal parlor.

Hattie poked her head into the kitchen. “Nothing!”

Edna Petunia frowned. “You want to go all the way into town just for lunch? What’s the occasion?”

Hattie and Katie stared at each other.

“His birthday!” Hattie exclaimed.

Edna Petunia looked sternly at each daughter. “You know very well that Cletus’s birthday was one month ago. If I have my math right, that means you’re about eleven months early for his birthday.”

Katie thought quickly. “Yes, that’s exactly right!” She and Hattie quickly returned to their chore of cleaning the formal parlor.

Edna Petunia shook her head. She knew her two daughters were up to something. It was only a matter of time before she figured out what it was.

Once they had finished all of their chores, Katie and Hattie set off for Cletus’s office. When they arrived, Cletus greeted them at the door with a huge smile. “What a surprise! What brings you two here to my little office?”

Timothy watched curiously from his desk. He was still amazed at how many adopted daughters Cletus had, and he had trouble keeping track of them.

Katie smiled. "We just wanted to visit you at work in honor of your birthday!"

"Happy early birthday!" Hattie shouted.

"We brought you some extra food for lunch," Katie explained, holding up a tin pail.

"To celebrate," Hattie added.

Cletus frowned. He knew his daughters, and if he were a betting man, he'd wager that there was something they weren't telling him. But for the moment, he was content to open the pail and see what they'd brought him. He peeked inside and saw freshly baked biscuits. "Oh my, girls. Thank you!"

Cletus took the pail over to the small table. "There are some plates in that cabinet." Katie and Hattie got out a few plates. Cletus broke off a piece of one of the biscuits and placed it in his mouth. He sighed with pleasure as he tasted its soft, buttery consistency. "You have to try one of these." Cletus held one out to Timothy. Timothy walked over to the small table and accepted the biscuit from Cletus. Both men began eating, and Katie and Hattie watched, pleased with their work.

"Wait a minute!" Cletus cried, and the girls froze. "My birthday's not for another eleven months! What are you up to, girls?"

"The truth is—" Hattie began.

"It's a surprise!" Katie interrupted her sister.

Cletus frowned. "You girls can be so odd at times. To tell the truth, I was about to take a stroll down Main Street to check on Minnie. She seemed a bit down this morning."

"Oh, yes, that would be great," Katie said happily.

"But didn't you want to eat lunch with me?" Now Cletus knew something was up. The girls' story didn't make sense.

"We do!" Hattie exclaimed. "But we are worried about Minnie, too."

Timothy's ears perked up at the mention of Minnie. He still thought about her lovely face and kind, generous spirit. Although she would never go for a man like him, he still wished her all the best and hoped she was doing well. "What's wrong with Minnie?"

"Nothing," Cletus said sharply. He didn't want Timothy getting any ideas.

"Why don't you go see Minnie, and we'll stay here and get lunch all prepared for you. When you get back, we can all eat together. How about that?" Katie suggested. She crossed her fingers behind her back, hoping Cletus would go along with her plan.

Cletus nodded slowly. He didn't know what the girls were up to, but whatever it was, he was sure he'd be able to handle it. He exited through the front doors so he could visit the mayor's office.

Timothy felt embarrassed to be left alone with the two young girls.

They were sweet, but he had always been shy and awkward among the fairer sex. He also was appreciative that Cletus trusted him so much that he was comfortable allowing the girls to stay in the office while Timothy was there. He knew plenty of fathers who wouldn't have trusted their male employees to act professionally.

"We wanted to talk to you," Katie began.

Timothy was shocked. "To me? About what?"

Hattie and Katie shared a smile. "About our sister, Minnie!" they said in chorus.

Timothy's heart beat a little faster. "What about her?"

"She hasn't been very lucky in the romance department lately," Katie explained.

"That doesn't make sense. I saw three different men come in to this very office and ask Cletus if they had his permission to court her!" Timothy said. He was confused by what the girls were trying to say.

"Yes, that's true. But none of them were her true love!" Katie smiled.

"Minnie only went out with two of the three men who asked her on a date. Abner doesn't count." Hattie tried to make sure Timothy understood what they were saying. "And her dates with Troy and John David were awful."

"Why are you telling me all this?" Timothy did not consider himself to be very knowledgeable when it came to women. If they were expecting him to give them some advice, they were out of luck.

Katie looked at Hattie nervously. She was a little unsure if she was doing the right thing, but she remembered how sad Minnie had looked at dinner the night before. "Because she's in love with another man."

Timothy had about had it. "There's *another* man involved?"

"Yes. It's you," Katie replied. For a man who Cletus claimed was quite intelligent, he seemed a little behind when it came to matters of the heart.

"Oh." Timothy stood up and began pacing. "Me?"

"Yes," Hattie agreed. "The question is—what are you going to do about it?"

Chapter 9

Timothy, you made three errors in this document. I've never seen you make a mistake once before." Cletus held up a stack of papers and held them out to Timothy.

Timothy stood up from his desk and collected the papers from Cletus. He felt embarrassed. "I'm sorry, Cletus. Won't let it happen again."

Cletus examined the younger man's expression. "Where's your head at, boy? You've seemed a little off all week."

Timothy looked at the floor. He knew he had been acting strangely ever since Minnie's sisters, Katie and Hattie, had paid him a visit. He wanted desperately to ask Cletus for permission to court Minnie. However, the man had lectured him time and time again on the virtue of not mixing business and family.

Timothy knew if he pursued Minnie Sanders, he could say goodbye to his job with Cletus. He wasn't ready to leave his position. He was learning so much and really felt he was doing good work for the people of Nowhere. He also didn't know how he would break it to his family that he'd lost this opportunity. His parents had been so proud when they learned that he'd be working for a town judge.

Still, he couldn't get Minnie off his mind. She was all he could think about, at all hours of the day. He constantly imagined what it would be like to see her again. He couldn't get her hair, her nose, or her delicate floral scent out of his mind. Working with Cletus was practically unbearable.

He had deliberated long and hard the previous evening. He knew that he couldn't live without Minnie. If it came right down to it, a job with Cletus or a life and family with Minnie, his choice was clear.

There was, however, the problem of how to break this news to Cletus. He was an intimidating figure, not just for his intellect, but also his fierce protection of his family. Timothy was worried that Cletus wouldn't think he was good enough for his daughter, although he hoped that Cletus would allow Minnie to decide for herself, as Cletus had with the other young men who'd asked his permission to court her.

Timothy frowned. There were so many things that could go wrong. First, Cletus might deny him permission to even ask Minnie out. Second, Cletus could fire him simply for asking. Third, assuming he did get permission from Cletus to ask Minnie on a date, Minnie had to actually agree to a date.

And finally, even if they went on a date, Minnie had to feel the same way about him that he felt about her. When he started to think about it, his plan seemed nearly impossible. What had he been thinking, listening to Katie and Hattie? They were two young girls. What did they know about love?

Cletus cleared his throat, and Timothy realized he was still standing in front of the man, papers in hand, frozen. "I'm sorry, sir." Timothy walked back to his desk and sat down.

All afternoon, Timothy tried to find the courage to ask Cletus for his permission to ask Minnie on a date. But each time he prepared himself and started to ask, Cletus asked him to work on a document, and he would lose his nerve while he finished the task.

Finally, at the end of the day, as Cletus was preparing to leave the office, Timothy blurted out what he'd been trying to say all day. "I want to ask your permission to date your daughter, sir." He was so anxious that the words came out in a rushed jumble.

Cletus put his hand to his ear. "You'll have to speak up, son. And slow down. What did you just say?"

Timothy took a deep breath and thought about what he wanted to say. "Sir, you know I appreciate everything you've done for me. You've taken me in, taught me more than I've learned from anyone, even schoolteachers."

"I don't like the sound of this." Cletus put his hands on his hips. "It sounds to me like you're going to quit on me."

"Please, hear me out." Timothy stood up and walked over to Cletus. "I know you don't believe in mixing business and family. I respect that, and I've tried to live by that. But I have fallen in love with your daughter, Minnie. I'd really like your permission to ask her on a date."

Cletus shook his head. "I was afraid this would happen."

Timothy was confused. "Excuse me?"

Cletus's eyes shone with silent laughter. "Every time an eligible young man comes to town, he ends up falling for one of my daughters. It's as regular as clockwork."

"Are you . . . you're not angry, sir?" Timothy asked cautiously.

Cletus shook his head. "I still believe a man shouldn't mix business and family, Timothy. If I've taught you anything, I hope I've taught you that."

Timothy sighed. "You're going to fire me, aren't you?"

Cletus chuckled. "No, Timothy, I'm not. You're a good man, hardworking, intelligent, and kind. I'd like to keep you on. But yes, I'll give you permission to ask Minnie for a date. On one condition."

"What's that, sir?" Timothy was nervous. Cletus could be awfully unpredictable at times.

"If you ever hurt her, not only will you not have a job, son, but I'll hunt you down and make sure you regret the day you first set foot in this town," Cletus said solemnly.

Timothy gulped. "Yes, sir." He knew Cletus's speech likely didn't matter. Minnie was probably going to reject his advances, and he'd be back to being the new man in town, single and lonely.

"Well, son, what are you waiting for?" Cletus grinned. It wasn't the way he would have planned it, but he had a good feeling about Timothy and Minnie. Timothy was just the type of upstanding young gentleman Cletus thought each and every one of his daughters deserved to marry.

Timothy blinked. "Excuse me, sir?"

"You've got a young woman to ask on a date. Go on, now!" Cletus shooed Timothy out of the office.

Timothy blushed and smiled. "Thank you, sir. I can't thank you enough."

"Thanks aren't needed. But you'd better go on ahead, now, because if you wait too long, another young man might come in here, wanting to propose!" Cletus roared with laughter, and Timothy decided to heed his advice.

Timothy rode his horse to the small house he rented in Nowhere and started to come up with a plan. Though every single part of him wanted to go immediately to the Sanders's house to ask Minnie out that very evening, he stopped himself from doing so. He wanted to make sure his first impression on Minnie as a potential suitor was perfect.

The following morning, Timothy was at work earlier than usual so he would be able to leave early. When Cletus came in, he looked a bit cross.

"Good morning!" Timothy called.

"Hmph. Good morning! What happened to you last evening? I thought you were going to come to the house and ask Minnie to go on a date with you," Cletus said.

"Oh, I'm sorry, sir. I didn't realize you thought that. I went home so I could plan out the perfect way to ask her. If you don't mind, I came in early to get all my work done so I can leave a bit early today," Timothy rushed to explain.

"That's all well and good, but I had to go through another night of my daughter acting miserable because she doesn't think she'll ever get

married,” Cletus grumbled.

“Hopefully, she’ll be happier by tonight,” Timothy said with a worried frown.

“There’s the spirit,” Cletus said cheerily, not even noticing Timothy’s expression. For the rest of the morning, Timothy and Cletus worked together. The older man was in good spirits, all things considered. A little after lunchtime, Timothy asked Cletus to be excused.

“Of course, son. As long as you don’t take another night planning. You don’t get to court a young woman by planning. You get to court a young woman by action,” Cletus explained.

Timothy nodded. “Yes, sir.” Timothy collected his things and prepared to leave the town judge’s quarters. “Oh, and Cletus, I have one more thing to ask you.”

Cletus sighed. “What on Earth could you possibly need?”

“Can you make sure Minnie doesn’t ride home with you this afternoon? I’d like to surprise her on her walk home,” Timothy explained.

“That’s fine with me, son.” Cletus shook his head as he watched Timothy walk out of the office. Timothy was an incredibly bright young man. Cletus even hoped one day he might take over as town judge. But Timothy could certainly stand to work on building his confidence.

Timothy untied his horse from a post on Main Street and climbed into the saddle. He flicked the reins to set off toward the mercantile. It was a quick ride, and Timothy hopped off and tied his horse up outside the store.

“Good morning!” said Minnie’s sister Ruby, whose husband, Lewis, ran the mercantile. Ruby recognized Timothy from church but couldn’t quite remember his name.

“Excuse me, are you one of Minnie Sanders’s sisters?” Timothy asked.

Ruby looked surprised. “Yes, I am. Why do you ask?”

“I’m working on a little surprise . . .” Timothy began.

After Timothy explained his plan, Ruby smiled. “I’m happy to help you. Oh, I’m just so excited!” Once Ruby had helped Timothy get everything he needed from the mercantile, she pointed him in the right direction for his next stop.

At Penny and Tom’s ranch just outside of Bagley, Timothy walked up to the large main house and knocked timidly.

Penny opened the door and stared at him, holding a baby in her arms, with another small boy at her feet. “Hi, Mr. Parker. What a surprise to see you here. Would you like to come in?”

Timothy felt awful for showing up unannounced and uninvited.

Then he realized he should take Cletus's advice and get on with it so Penny would understand why he had come here to see her.

Timothy explained what he was trying to do, and Penny's eyes filled with tears. "That's one of the sweetest things I've ever heard, Mr. Parker."

"Call me Timothy."

"I have just the thing for you, Timothy. I'll be right back." Without missing a beat, Penny bounced the baby onto her hip and headed into another part of the large, beautiful home. The other little boy trailed behind her, sucking his thumb. Timothy had seen several older boys, nearly men, working on various projects when he'd ridden up to the ranch. But Penny looked young, not much older than Minnie. Surely, these children couldn't all be hers, could they?

Timothy found himself wondering about what his and Minnie's children might look like. He hoped they'd get her beautiful, sunny smile and kind personality. He had always pictured having four or five children, but who knew what Minnie wanted? Maybe coming from a big family made her want to have several children, too.

Timothy frowned. He was getting ahead of himself. There was no guarantee Minnie would even go on a date with him, much less marry him! He looked around Penny and Tom's home. It was huge, and each room was furnished handsomely. Timothy also realized that if Minnie did want to be with him, he'd have to find alternative living arrangements. His rental house was perfect for one person, but it would be too small for a couple. And even though he knew Minnie wasn't overly particular, he knew she was accustomed to a certain kind of lifestyle. He would make sure he provided that lifestyle for her no matter what.

Penny came back downstairs, now carrying the baby, the small boy, and a long, thin box. Timothy stood up and took the box from her. "Let me help you with that."

Penny grinned. "She'll love this, I'm sure of it. I had been saving that for one of the younger girls, but this is perfect!" Penny was almost as excited as Timothy seemed.

"Thank you so much, Penny!" Timothy took the long box from her and waved goodbye to Penny and her sons. As he left the ranch, he also called out a farewell to the young men working outside.

Next, Timothy hurried back to his rental house. After he had tied up his horse, he raced up the stairs and changed into his finest suit. He adjusted his tie in the mirror, wanting to look his best. In a way, he felt like this was one of the most important days of his life.

After Timothy was satisfied with his appearance, he went back outside, climbed back onto his horse, and set off for a spot just outside of town where he knew he'd run into Minnie. He had seen her take

this route several times on her way to and from work.

Timothy dismounted his horse and prepared for Minnie's approach. He couldn't wait to see her.

Meanwhile, Minnie was packing up her things, about to leave the mayor's office for the evening. She had been better able to focus on her responsibilities that afternoon, and she was pleased she was making progress. If she couldn't have the happily ever after she had dreamed about, maybe she could have a career that she would be proud of. Mayor Winstead and Agatha seemed to appreciate her work.

Minnie locked the door and set off toward Cletus's office. He had been giving her rides to and from work, which she appreciated. It wasn't as thrilling as riding in John David's automobile, but John David had had his chance. She preferred the stability of Cletus's covered wagon to any ride with someone like John David.

There had been a few times Minnie had daydreamed about climbing onto horseback with Timothy Parker, as she had almost done on her first day of work when she had been late. But she knew Cletus still disapproved. Plus, there was no way Timothy would be interested in a girl like her. She had dropped as many hints as she could, and the man wasn't budging.

Minnie hoped she would at least see him when she stopped by Cletus's office, but to her surprise, the judge's quarters were locked. No one was in sight, and there was a piece of paper trapped under the door. Minnie picked it up and read it. In Cletus's handwriting, it said, "Left early. You'll have to walk home."

Minnie sighed. It was a long walk back to the Sanders's house, and she wasn't looking forward to it in the heat spell that had lingered in Nowhere for the past several weeks. It was normally hot, but this was something else entirely.

Minnie set out toward her family's home, walking slowly to keep from overheating. She fanned herself with the piece of paper from Cletus she had taken from underneath the door. She wondered why Cletus had gone home early. She hoped he wasn't ill.

Minnie thought her eyes were playing tricks on her when she first saw a man in a suit standing next to a horse in the middle of her path to the Sanders's house. As she got closer, she realized it was Timothy!

Timothy swallowed nervously as Minnie approached. He hoped against hope that she would consider going on a date with him. He had so much more that he wanted to ask her, but he felt that was an important place to start.

Minnie had never seen Timothy looking so handsome. He wore a crisp black suit with a beautiful blue silk tie. His eyes were gleaming, and he held a gorgeous bouquet of flowers in his hand. He also carried a long, thin box. Minnie looked at it curiously as she got closer. A

dashing Timothy made her heart beat faster than ever.

"Hello, Minnie," Timothy began. "These are for you." He handed her the floral arrangement.

Minnie inhaled a deep breath as she accepted the flowers. "They're absolutely perfect. Thank you so much."

"You're welcome. I have a very important question to ask you," Timothy told Minnie. "But first, these are for you, too."

Timothy handed Minnie the long, thin box. Minnie opened the box and pulled out a pair of white silk gloves. Minnie ran a hand along the soft material. "Oh, my. They're exquisite! Thank you!"

"You're welcome. Your sister Penny helped me with that. She made them. I wanted to give you a present that would be something nice you could wear on a date," Timothy said boldly.

Minnie thought she had an idea where this was going, but she didn't want to get her hopes up. "Hm. They're beautiful, but I don't have any dates planned. It's a shame."

Timothy laughed. "I hope to change that, Minnie. I asked Cletus permission to ask you out on a date. I wanted to get your thoughts on the matter. Minnie Sanders, will you go out with me this Saturday evening?"

Now, Minnie was doubting her ears. She had given up hope that Timothy Parker was interested in her in any way, and now he was asking her out on a date! She wondered when he had asked Cletus for this permission. She couldn't believe Cletus hadn't warned her!

Suddenly, Minnie felt self-conscious. For the past few days, she hadn't cared what she was wearing or what she looked like. Now, she felt shabby standing in front of Timothy in his well-tailored suit.

Timothy sensed that Minnie felt unsure about something. He wanted to make sure she understood his intentions. "Minnie, I've been attracted to you since the moment I met you. You're beautiful and kind, and I have fun any time I see you or talk to you. Nothing would give me greater pleasure than to court you."

Minnie relaxed a little. "Nothing would give you greater pleasure, is that right?"

Timothy blushed. "Nothing appropriate."

"We'll have to see about that." Minnie paused. "I do have one question for you."

"Anything." Timothy prayed that she'd accept his invitation.

"What took you so long to ask me on a date if you've felt this way since we met?" Minnie wondered.

"Honestly, Minnie, it was Cletus that kept me from asking you out. He didn't want us to become involved, and I wanted to respect his wishes. He and I had a good talk today, and he told me I could ask you." Timothy hoped Minnie would understand.

“Yes. He said something to me about that, too. No mixing business and family,” Minnie recalled.

“Yes, that’s exactly right. Oh, and there was the small matter of three different men asking Cletus’s permission to ask you on a date! I didn’t think I had a chance,” Timothy reminded Minnie.

Minnie laughed. “Trust me, the others never had a chance!”

Timothy still hadn’t heard a ‘yes’ from Minnie, but he was feeling more positive because of her smile and light tone. “Is that so?”

“Yes, I haven’t been able to get you out of my head since I met you! And the others proved to me that they were really not good matches,” Minnie told Timothy.

“I have to admit, I was pretty jealous,” Timothy confided.

“Well, Abner doesn’t count. He’s constantly chasing after every girl in town,” Minnie explained. “Troy was nice enough, but he really wasn’t able to talk to me. I think communication is very important in a relationship. I couldn’t see a future for the two of us.”

“What about that young man with the fancy automobile?” Timothy asked.

Minnie laughed. “Well, he revealed his true character to me, and I did not like what I saw. He was very rude to people who worked for him, and I wasn’t impressed. I don’t feel like spending more time with him at all.”

“Wow. Sounds like you’ve been through a lot in the past few weeks,” Timothy remarked.

“I can truthfully say it’s been full of ups and downs.” Minnie shrugged.

“I hope right now can count as an up.” Timothy looked at Minnie expectantly.

Minnie smiled. “I would love to go out with you this Saturday. I look forward to it.”

A wave of relief washed over Timothy. Just as he started to relax, a new fear set in. Now he had only a few days to plan the perfect date!

Chapter 10

Saturday morning and afternoon dragged on for Minnie. She couldn't wait to go on her date with Timothy. Minnie's sisters helped her prepare for her date. She bathed with a lilac-scented soap that Dorothy had given her for her birthday. Theresa braided her hair, and Katie wove a tiny bit of baby's breath into each plait.

Edna Petunia helped Minnie pick out a lovely blouse and skirt to wear and let her borrow a necklace Cletus had bought her as a gift. She also wore the beautiful silk gloves from Penny as Timothy had asked. "Remember, Minnie, if he does anything you don't like, you come right home, and Cletus and I will deal with him."

Minnie smiled. "I don't think that will be necessary, Edna Petunia, but thank you."

"You never know with young men these days. They don't make them like they used to," Edna Petunia complained. The girls knew when Edna Petunia spoke like this, it meant she had a story to tell about how this generation's young men paled in comparison to the young men of her generation.

"Cletus can attest to it. Timothy is different. He has excellent manners and is respectful of all my wishes," Minnie reassured her adoptive mother.

"Hm. Well, you know where we'll be this evening," Edna Petunia said. Minnie smiled. She knew Edna Petunia was just looking out for her. Her parents could be so overprotective sometimes!

The hours ticked by slowly. Minnie tried to play a few games with her sisters to distract herself, but she wasn't able to concentrate for very long. She kept imagining Timothy's arms wrapped around her own, or his lips pressing against hers. Every time she thought of him, she got shivers down her spine and felt flushed. She had to get a glass of cold water to cool herself down.

Finally, the appointed hour arrived. Timothy drove up with his normal horse and another horse pulling a wagon.

Minnie was impressed. "Since when do you have a wagon?"

Timothy grinned. "Since earlier today. I ran a few errands, and finding a more permanent mode of transportation was important."

“Why is that?” Minnie asked.

“One horse isn’t going to be big enough for me and my future wife and children.”

Minnie could feel her face turning red. She wished she had kept some of that cold water. She longed for Timothy’s touch so badly that it hurt, but she tried to act calm. “Wife and children? My, this is an interesting first date.”

“The first of many, I hope. Also, I’d be remiss if I didn’t tell you that you look stunning tonight.” Timothy admired Minnie’s hair and clothes.

“Thank you.” Minnie felt so wonderful listening to Timothy’s compliments. She could get used to this.

Timothy helped Minnie climb into the wagon. Cletus and Edna Petunia came out to see them off. Timothy shook both of their hands and thanked Cletus again for his trust in him.

“Don’t make me regret it, son,” Cletus said sternly. Minnie fought back a giggle. Cletus had the biggest heart of anyone she knew. But he also was very good at playing the role of the grumpy, overprotective father. And though he hadn’t been tested recently, she knew he meant it. If anyone truly harmed one of his daughters, they would regret it. Still, she knew that wouldn’t be necessary with Timothy. She’d managed to find one of the good ones.

Timothy and Minnie waved goodbye to Cletus and Edna Petunia as they set off.

“I realized I never asked. Where are we going?” Minnie asked once they were moving.

“It’s a surprise.” Timothy smiled.

Minnie felt a thrill of excitement. She knew she shouldn’t get her hopes up on a first date, but she couldn’t help it. She had a very good feeling about Timothy already.

The sun had just begun to set, and the sky was a beautiful mix of colors. Timothy parked the wagon in a small wooded area near Main Street and tied the horses to a post. He helped Minnie down from the wagon, then got a picnic basket from the back.

“I hope you like what I brought,” Timothy said shyly. He unpacked a blanket and set it down on the ground, then pulled out a loaf of bread, a small ball of butter, a few jars of jam, and some apples. “I like this spot because the sunset looks beautiful, and once the sun goes down fully, we’ll be able to see the stars.”

“Thank you.” Minnie was impressed. “All of this looks delicious.”

Timothy looked relieved as he began unwrapping the food and utensils he’d brought. “I’m so glad you agreed to come out with me tonight. I wasn’t sure you would be interested.”

“Really? I tried to send you a hint that day we had lunch in

Cletus's office!" Minnie exclaimed. "I thought you were simply not interested in me!"

"How could you think that? I've been interested in you since the very first day we met." Timothy grinned at Minnie.

"It doesn't matter. All that matters is that we're together now." Minnie laughed.

"And I intend to keep it that way." Timothy stared at her, pretending to be stern, and they both burst into laughter.

Minnie felt free to say anything in front of Timothy. She didn't feel like she needed to be on her best behavior. She could relax and just be herself without any pressure to act like someone she was not.

Pink, red, and purple light danced across the sky as Minnie and Timothy ate their supper. They talked and laughed for hours as the sun went down and it grew dark.

A few stars shone brightly in the night sky, and Timothy scooted a little closer to Minnie so they could both see the stars. As he brushed against her, Minnie felt a tingling sensation all across her body.

"Minnie Sanders, I want to be with you every moment of the day," Timothy whispered into her ear, setting off another wave of tingling.

"That's what I want, too," Minnie replied softly.

Timothy buried his face into Minnie's hair and inhaled deeply. He loved the smell of this woman. Well, technically, he loved everything about this woman, but her smell was also incredibly lovely.

Timothy and Minnie stayed seated like that for some time, enjoying the closeness of each other's company. Finally, Timothy couldn't take it anymore.

He lowered his head and began kissing Minnie passionately. Minnie was surprised at first but soon began to kiss back. Though she had never been kissed before, his tongue pressing against hers was suddenly the most natural thing in the world.

Timothy caressed Minnie's arms with his hands. He wanted to go further, but he stopped himself. He moaned in pleasure, feeling her slight, warm body against his.

"There's so much more I want to do to you," Timothy confided.

Minnie groaned. "I want that, too, but obviously, we can't."

Timothy sighed. "I know you're right, but pulling myself away from you feels so wrong."

"I know exactly what you mean." Minnie's body longed for more attention from Timothy. She wanted to feel his hands all over her body, to feel his lips caressing every inch of her.

Timothy struggled to catch his breath. "The effect you have on me is crazy."

"I could say the same thing about you." Minnie couldn't believe how right everything felt. When she had been on her dates with Troy

and John David, she had felt no physical connection to them. Now, it felt like she and Timothy were linked by something magnetic. Everywhere he went, she wanted to go.

"I'm going to have to stop myself before I do something foolish and get us both in trouble." Timothy exhaled.

"I appreciate that," Minnie told him. "As you know, my family and I are very traditional."

"I wish we didn't have to stop, though."

"I have an idea," Minnie said. "Please stand up."

Timothy stood up, confused.

Minnie moved the picnic basket to the middle of the blanket. "I don't want our date to end. I want to keep talking to you. But I think we need a barrier between us."

Minnie sat on one side of the basket, and she gestured for Timothy to have a seat on the other side. Timothy grinned. He was just thrilled the night didn't have to end.

Timothy and Minnie spent hours talking and laughing as the night went on. Timothy couldn't believe how strong their conversation was. He and Minnie were compatible on everything, from activities they enjoyed to foods they liked to the value of hard work and perseverance.

After a few hours, Timothy worked up the nerve to ask another question he'd had in mind for a while. "Minnie Sanders, this is going to sound nuts, but please hear me out. I've had my eye on you since I came to this town, and I know I'll never meet another woman who is more perfect for me. I know this is our first date, but will you marry me?"

Minnie couldn't believe it! She pushed the picnic basket out of the way and kissed Timothy square on the lips. "Yes!"

Timothy breathed a huge sigh of relief. He had been a little nervous that Minnie would have thought he was strange for proposing so quickly, but then he remembered a few stories Cletus had told him about his other daughters. Apparently, quick marriage proposals were somewhat common for the Sanders girls. Timothy hoped there would be a short engagement as well. He couldn't wait to make Minnie Sanders his bride.



A FEW WEEKS LATER, it was a beautiful, hot summer day. The people of Nowhere, dressed in their finest, set up dozens of dishes on picnic tables outside the local church.

"Attention!" Katie Sanders cried. "The ceremony is about to

begin!”

The townspeople swarmed into the church. As organ music began to play, everyone quieted. At the back of the church, Minnie Sanders appeared, escorted by her father, Cletus. Minnie wore a stunning white silk gown and the white silk gloves Timothy had given her. Her hair fell in soft curls around her shoulders. She looked more beautiful than even Timothy had dreamed she would.

Timothy beamed at his beautiful bride. He knew they didn't have to wait much longer, but he simply couldn't stand another moment not being married to Minnie. The past few weeks had been challenging enough, trying to coordinate plans for his family to attend a wedding in Nowhere and trying to figure out how to plan a wedding for one of the Sanders daughters.

Edna Petunia had gone back and forth on whether or not she wanted to help with the wedding a dozen times. In the end, she had settled for baking a cake and allowing Minnie and Timothy to make the rest of the decisions.

Timothy had allowed Minnie and her sisters to take over, and he had to hand it to them. Everything was perfect. Then again, there was only one thing that mattered. At the end of the day, he'd be married to Minnie Sanders.

Cletus walked Minnie down the aisle and shook Timothy's hand.

As Pastor Micah began the familiar service, Minnie beamed at the congregation. She didn't know what she had done to deserve such a wonderful life, and it was only just beginning.

Epilogue

Six months later, Minnie waved goodbye to her sister and came back into the house carrying a box. She loved the house Timothy had purchased for them just after they'd gotten married. He had used his savings from his new job and a small gift from his parents to purchase a large, rambling farmhouse near where Penny and Tom lived. The farmhouse needed some work, so each weekend for the past six months, Timothy and several of his brothers-in-law and nephews had lovingly fixed up nearly every room in the house.

Now, Minnie had a huge kitchen that she loved, a wonderful parlor full of comfortable furniture, and several bedrooms in case guests wanted to visit. She also had a few plans for filling up those bedrooms with children.

Timothy came into the parlor and saw the box Minnie was carrying. He took it from her. "Where would you like me to put this?"

Minnie smiled gratefully at her husband. She still couldn't believe her luck to be married to such a good man. "Thank you. Over on the desk would be great."

Timothy set the box down on the desk. "What's in here, anyway? It's very light."

"Oh, just a few things Dorothy thought might come in handy for me," Minnie said casually.

Timothy was curious. "Oh, for the house?"

"Not quite." Minnie grinned.

"Clothes for you?" Timothy guessed.

Minnie giggled. "You're very close, but the clothes in that box aren't for me."

Now Timothy was puzzled.

Minnie walked over to him. "Why don't you open the box?"

Timothy was completely lost, but he did as Minnie suggested. He pulled out the first thing his hand felt in the box and held it up. It was an elaborate white christening gown designed for an infant. Timothy gasped. "You don't mean—?"

Minnie beamed. "Yes. We're going to have a baby!"

Timothy's mouth dropped open. Starting a family with Minnie was

everything he had ever wanted. "I'm so happy! I love you!"

"I love you, too." Minnie walked over to Timothy and placed his hand on her stomach. It was still flat. Dr. Harvey had guessed she was about three months along, but Minnie knew from watching her sisters go through pregnancy that that soon wouldn't be the case.

Minnie sighed happily as Timothy wrapped his arms around her and covered her in kisses. Everything had worked out exactly right. She had married her perfect man, and they were about to start the family she'd always dreamed of.

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